

A CINDERELLA *for the* DUKE

Amazon Bestselling Author

ABBY AYLES

A Cinderella for the Duke
A Historical Regency Romance Novel

Edited by
Elizabeth Connor



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ABBY AYLES



Historical Romance Author



Contents

Be a part of Abby Ayles' family...	
Be a part of Fanny Finch's family...	
A message from Abby	
Introduction	
Chapter 1	
Chapter 2	
Chapter 3	
Chapter 4	
Chapter 5	
Chapter 6	
Chapter 7	
Chapter 8	
Chapter 9	
Chapter 10	
Chapter 11	
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	
Chapter 25	
Chapter 26	
Chapter 27	
Chapter 28	
Chapter 29	
Chapter 30	
Chapter 31	
Chapter 32	
Epilogue	
The Extended Epilogue	
Do you want more Historical Romance?	
Engaging Love	
Saving Lady Abigail	
Be a part of the Abby Ayles family...	
Also By Abby Ayles	
Be a part of Fanny Finch's family...	

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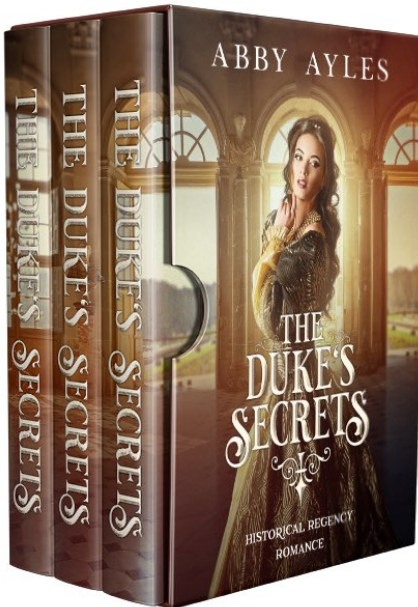
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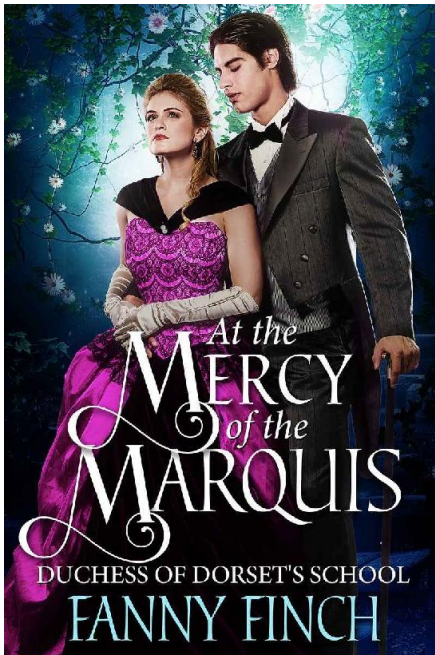
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A message from Abby

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love

ABBY AYLES



Historical Romance Author



A Cinderella for the Duke

Lady Louisa Frasier is in a sullen situation. With her brother, the Earl of Gilchrist, gone to America with his wife, and her best friend, the Duchess of Wintercrest, taking care of her young children far up north, she seems to have no friends to keep her company.

It is when her mother, the dowager countess, suggest a visit to her aunt in the lake district that prospects seem to look up for Lady Louisa. The Dowager Countess and her sister have not been on the best of terms, and Lady Louisa's single goal is to mend the bond broken.

Arriving in their quaint country town, Lady Louisa soon learns that her aunt, Lady Hendrickson, has no desire to regain any family connection and instead seizes the opportunity to use Lady Louisa till she can take no more.

Henry Vaughan, the Duke of Rowland, has reluctantly returned to his country seat. Upon his Uncle's most insistent request he is to acquire a wife before he may return back to the life he has enjoyed.

Undoubtedly this will be an easy task as he has no preference to whom the woman shall be, and plenty distant country ladies will happily flock at the opportunity to be a Duchess.

The Duke's indifference changes in an instant when a chance meeting with a masked mystery woman at his own private masquerade fills his every waking moment. Who was that enchantress? Why has she hidden herself despite his desperate attempts to find her?

Lady Louisa has no intention of telling the Duke that she was the one he met that fateful night. Her aunt is wholly set on snagging the duke for her oldest daughter. Despite her growing attraction to the Duke of

Rowland and the fact that this could quite possibly be her only chance at finding true love, she must keep her promise to make peace with her aunt's family.

Will the Duke ever find his mystery lady in green?

Will Lady Louisa find her own strength to stand up for herself and find her own path to walk in life?

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to go," Lady Louisa said to her mother across the breakfast table. "I would worry about you, Mother."

In Lady Gilchrist's hand was a letter from a relative of whom Lady Louisa had not heard more than a handful of words spoken.

"I agree that it is regrettable that Aunt Sarah's husband has died, but I don't see how my attending to her can help. After all, does she not have children of her own?" Lady Louisa continued pushing aside the toast and marmalade set before her.

"She does have two daughters. They are not much younger than you. I know that you will not have to do much help them, but it would be nice if you went anyway."

Lady Gilchrist was looking much better now, though the year anniversary of her own husband's death had been a hard hurdle for her to overcome. She scarcely believed that she would have done as well without the constant companionship of her daughter. Lady Louisa always seemed to be a calm mind amid turmoil.

"I am surprised at all that Aunt Sarah wrote and told you," Lady Louisa said taking a sip of her hot chocolate.

"As am I. In fact, I cannot remember the last time either one of us spoke to the other. I find it to be a hand of goodwill and I think it would be only right for me to give one in return. Sarah is not as well off as us," Lady Gilchrist continued. "It would do well for her to have the added help. It also might be nice for you," she finished with an arch of her blonde brow.

“In what way?” Lady Louisa responded with skepticism.

She wasn’t sure how leaving town, her only home really, to stay with relations she barely even knew about would be to her benefit.

“Well, for starters, you only know our circles here in London. It might be nice for you to see prospects on a broader horizon.”

“Prospects? Mother, I am twenty-six almost twenty-seven years old. I believe the time of prospects is over for me,” Lady Louisa said in honesty.

“I don’t think that is true,” Lady Gilchrist countered. “You are in your prime if you ask me. Perhaps this new change of location will give you the courage to stand out. If you would only do that, I know you could find your own happiness.”

“Perhaps,” Lady Louisa said doing her best not to roll her eyes.

Her mother was always encouraging her to step out more and be noticed. Lady Gilchrist loved her daughter dearly and for that reason refused to see that she would be nothing more than a demure wallflower for the whole of her life.

Lady Louisa was not like her brother who was always free with words and off on exciting adventures. It was not her way, nor would it ever be. Though she would have liked to have a romance and family of her own, she had resolved quite some time ago that the chances of that were very slim.

Not only was Lady Louisa quiet and reserved, but she was also quite homely. Perhaps it didn’t help that her best friend Isabella, the Duchess of Wintercrest, was just about the most eye-catching creature in the whole of the ton both in looks and personality.

In truth, Lady Louisa was a bit curious to know more of this family that she had otherwise never heard much about. She knew that some rift had occurred between her mother and aunt but nothing beyond

that. Her aunt's house was, in fact, not very far from their own country seat.

"If I am to go," Lady Louisa said timidly, "I would like to know what caused the hostility between you two? I would hate to make a situation worse."

"I highly doubt you could do such a thing. You always seem to be the pillar that all the rest of us looked to. You have such a calming steadying force about you," Lady Gilchrist complemented.

She was hoping it would distract her daughter from the question at hand. Her rift with her sister seemed very petty now that she was older and somewhat of an embarrassment to have to tell her daughter about it.

When Lady Louisa wouldn't let the subject go without a straight answer, however, the dowager countess had no choice but to explain it all with an exasperated sigh. "I suppose my sister grew resentful over time."

"Of what?" Lady Louisa encouraged.

"Well, she was intended to marry your father." "What?" Lady Louisa let out in exasperated shock.

She couldn't believe the words her mother was speaking. How had she never heard this before?

"They had never even met each other when the arrangement was made. In fact, I am certain our parents made it from her infancy. Sarah had a bit of a rebellious streak in her youth and was determined against marrying a man she didn't know all for the sake of our family connections."

Lady Gilchrist moved her hand to her hair and smoothed back a curl that encircled her face out of habit. It was easy to see this wasn't a comfortable subject for her.

“Sarah fell in love with Mr. Hendrickson, and they ran away and eloped before my parents could say otherwise.”

“I don’t understand, then why is she upset with you?”

“Well, the reason for their rushed elopement was because your father was to come and acquire his bride that very week. He didn’t know of the events until he and your grandparents arrived on my family’s doorstep.

It was most embarrassing for your Grandfather, my father that is. I fear he never forgave Sarah for that.”

Lady Gilchrist was silent for a moment as her past seemed to flash before her eyes.

“Luckily, the Frasier’s were very good friends and understanding of the whole circumstance. Even your father, God rest him, was not very hurt by the slight and insult of it all. They stayed for a time, and the result was our union.”

“I still don’t understand why Aunt Sarah would be angry with you? She had no interest in Father it would seem. Why would she care that you married him in her stead?”

Lady Louisa could see the complication of the events but if anything her own mother should have been the one angry that she was forced to marry the one meant for her sister.

“We married to fulfill the honor of the promise, not because we cared for each other. I am not the first to do such a thing certainly, but I am one of the lucky ones that actually found enjoyment in the arrangement.”

“Your aunt held tight to her principles that she should have been free to choose for herself and not be forced into a union. When she heard of me taking her place, she thought of me as weak. I was marrying a man for the security of his name and fortune, and she married for

love.”

“Unfortunately for her, she has lived a very hard life due to her choice. Mr. Hendrick, though a landowner, did not have the means to give Sarah the life she was accustomed to. I think over time, and because of her great many hardships, she resented her choice.”

“Our parents also disowned her for her actions,” Lady Gilchrist added at the end. “All that was to be split between us two sisters upon my father’s departure from this world was given in whole to me.”

“I see,” Lady Louisa said.

“I offered to give Sarah at the very least her portion. They certainly needed all of it more than we did. She would not hear of it. I suppose that was the final nail for her. I had meant it in goodwill, but she took it as an act of gloating.”

“I am not sure how I can help this in any way. I can’t imagine that anything I could say or do would change Aunt Sarah’s heart towards us,” Lady Louisa said searching her own thoughts.

“I am sure you are right in that fact, at least for me.

None the less, it is our duty as Christians to extend the hand of friendship and love to those in their time of need. I know she would never receive me. Our relationship is permanently destroyed, but that doesn’t mean yours has to be with either your aunt or your cousins.”

“So what would you have me do?” Lady Louisa asked.

“Simply be there for your aunt. Help in any way that you see fit. Be a good friend to your cousins. In these ways, you can mend the bond severed between our two families.” Lady Gilchrist passed for a moment before giving a half smile. “If you should happen to find your prospect at the same time, all the better.”

Lady Louisa did roll her eyes this time at her mother’s words. Yes, her

mother wanted her to go and create a connection where once it had been and now was lost. But Lady Louisa suspected it was more her mother's last effort to do duty of seeing her only daughter settled in life.

If only she had the words to tell Lady Gilchrist that such a thing was not just unlikely but surely impossible. She did not possess a great beauty or eloquence in words when it mattered. Yes, in the safety of her home or around close friends she was more open than she would otherwise be. But even in these instances, she would still be considered reserved.

Why Lady Gilchrist thought sending her to a far-off country with relations she didn't know would make her into that shining light her mother always hoped her to be, she didn't know. If anything it would have an adverse effect on her ability to be outspoken.

"I suppose it would be the right thing for me to go and at least see if I could ease the blow a bit. After all, I have experienced the loss of a father and can comfort my cousins in that way."

Lady Gilchrist broke out in a satisfied smile before setting the note aside that had resided in her hand for the whole of their conversation.

"I will write to your aunt today and suggest the arrangement."

Lady Louisa nodded before turning back to her hot chocolate. She wondered how her mother would fare all alone here. With the Earl of Gilchrist and his wife, Abigail, gone to the Americas, there didn't seem to be anyone here to keep her company.

Of course, she did have all their friends here as well as London and several societies to keep her busy. Perhaps her mother would scarcely notice her absence. Though the year mark of her father's death had brought her mother into a deep depression, she had been wise in keeping her hands busy. In that way, the Dowager Countess had overcome the memory of the darkest day in her life.

Lady Louisa reflected on this new-found information on her mother and father. If she had never been told, she was sure to have believed they had married for love. The affection and warmth that seemed to emanate from her memory of her parents never once speaking of an arranged marriage.

Perhaps while she was away with her aunt, she could somehow show that her mother had never meant to slight her sister. Nor had she intended to take away any possession that belonged to Aunt Sarah.

Lady Louisa knew that pride and jealous were not easy vices to overcome, especially one rooted so deeply for such a long time. Perhaps in her own small ways, though, she could begin to help her aunt see the providence in her elopement and the resulting marriage of Louisa's parents. For surely all things were done for a purpose. If there was one thing that Lady Louisa was actually good at, it was to see the goodness, the answer amid the darkness.

Lady Louisa did her best to calm her inner turmoil as she saw the Hendrickson's house come into view. Really, the only other country estate she had to compare it to was Wintercrest Manor. Naturally, it was not as vast as Isabella's home. Lady Louisa had no memory of her own family's country estate as she had not been there since her early childhood.

Mentheith House, as she had learned it was named, may not have been the vast estates of Wintercrest, but it had its own charm. It was a simple house that looked worn with age. Along the front was a wall of ivy climbing and twisting amongst the windows.

Exiting the carriage that had brought her thus far, she was surprised to see that no one was outside to greet her. They had to have heard the clamor of wooden wheels and hoof prints clacking on the pebble and dirt road. There was no other property nearby; they would know that it was she arriving and none else. She could smell the pungent odor of the pig barn just to the left of the house and hear the whine of their own horse in a stable.

For the most part, she found the country refreshing and invigorating. She had experienced so much just in her short ride she couldn't even imagine how much more the country might have to offer.

She waited patiently as the coachman removed her chest from on top of the carriage. Lady Louisa wondered if she should walk up to the chipping blue painted? paned? door and knock. Before she could raise her hand, the door opened and an elderly looking footman came out.

"You must be Lady Louisa," he said in a quaking voice with a bow. He

was vastly unkempt compared to her own footmen. His clothes were soiled, nails dirty, and hair flowing free in cobweb wisps.

“I am,” Lady Louisa responded timidly as she brushed the dust of travel from her grey muslin dress with her leather traveling gloves.

“I am Mr. Johnson, the head butler,” he said moving over to her luggage.

He promptly took the hat box from her hand and laid it on top of the chest to take them both. Lady Louisa hesitated for just a moment. He seemed far too old to be doing such hard work.

“I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Johnson, but perhaps there is another that could take my things in? I fear it may be quite significant in size and weight.”

“That’s very kind of you to worry after me, m’lady, but I promise you I am quite capable, and the only one available.”

“You could not possibly be the only groomsmen for such a house?” Lady Louisa inquired.

It may have been of humble size compared to Wintercrest, but even her own London house had a butler and two groomsmen.

“There are three others, m’lady. However, during the day they are to tend to the fields of the property and see to the animals. I promise you that we do our best to be sufficiently staffed with what we have. Lady Hendrickson has her own lady’s maid and two for the use of her daughters, Miss Hendrickson and Miss Mary.

You will be happy to know that for your visit you will be attended by one solely for your needs. ”

“Oh, I see,” Lady Louisa said.

She hadn’t meant to seem presumptuous or rude. Really she was just

surprised to hear such little staffing of the estate. She hadn't expected that.

"I am grateful for my aunt's willingness to see to my comfort. Perhaps I will be received by her shortly so that I may speak my thanks in person?" Lady Louisa asked doing her best not to seem rude again.

"Lady Hendrickson will receive you in the drawing room this afternoon," Mr. Johnson informed as he hoisted up her chest.

She followed behind him promptly not wishing him to have to tarry for her any more than needed as he struggled into the house. She did her best to study the surroundings as they made their way up to her room.

Most of the walls were darkened with the black soot of time. Even the portraits on the wall were scarcely recognizable. Other than the general disrepair of an old home with limited resources to maintain it, the house seemed rather cozy and home-like.

Mr. Johnson led her up the stairs and down the hall past several doors. Soon the hall became narrower, and ceiling seemed to brush against Mr. Johnson's head. He didn't seem much taller than Lady Louisa herself. She was sure he was taking her through the main sleeping area and into the servants' quarters.

"Forgive the tight space," Mr. Johnson said as he slid open the first door in the narrow hall. "The estate doesn't afford guest rooms."

He pushed open the door and walked in setting down her trunk. Lady Louisa entered after him. In the room were two simple beds with drawers between them. Next to the door was a simple washbasin stand; the only other fixture in the room was the large window with blue shutters. Lady Louisa noticed that they matched the color of the front door.

One of the beds had a much finer quilt while the other was thread barren. She guessed that the room was meant for the female servants.

She walked forward to look out the window. Lady Louisa gasped at the sight.

In her view was the vast of the property with a beautifully clear lake in the distance. She could see one of the groomsmen working in a field below her as well as several gardens in disrepair. Since they were facing the back the house, she guessed them to be the kitchen and medicinal gardens. Lady Louisa hoped that she could peruse them thoroughly, for she dearly loved to learn about plants and their therapeutic and health benefits.

“What a beautiful view,” Lady Louisa commented.

“Yes,” Mr. Johnson said with a huff as he set down her chest at the edge of the fine quilted bed. “Madam is kind enough to afford us our own rooms on the estate, but with your coming Bess was quick to volunteer hers. She knew how breathtaking the view is. Your ladyship will be even more impressed in the evening. The sun sets just there,” he moved forward and pointed over the lake.

“It is a most spectacular view as it reflects in the water,” he said with a soft smile.

“I am most grateful for your sacrifice on my behalf, and Bess’ as well.”

“Well,” he said scratching some stubble on his chin in embarrassment, “we are more than happy to oblige.”

“There is plenty of room, however. I don’t mind sharing the space with Bess.”

“Oh, no m’lady. We wouldn’t have it that way.”

Mr. Johnson excused himself from the room, and Lady Louisa reflected on the odd happenings that had already occurred since arriving at her aunt’s house. For starters was the butler’s final words. He spoke as if he and the other servants would not have allowed such a thing.

Surely her aunt had other guests visit her. Did she make them all stay in the quarters with the servants, and if so was it in a shared room with them as it seemed the butler and others were the ones against such a thing?

Lady Louisa did her best not to contemplate the strange beginning of her little visit too hard and instead prepared to meet her aunt. She felt overly nervous for her first meeting. It was odd as it was that her aunt wasn't present at her arrival.

After freshening up and changing into a rose silk dress, Lady Louisa felt prepared to meet her aunt. She wanted to make the best of the first impression for she had a feeling that the whole trip would hinge on this.

Her dress was a little ruffled from the time in the trunk, and she hoped her aunt wouldn't hold it against her. Not to mention her hair was still a bit worn from the two-day ride from London. She had hoped that Bess might appear and help her get ready.

Usually, she wouldn't have cared much about her looks, but today seemed to be the day that putting her best foot forward really counted. She retraced her steps back down the hall and stairs not entirely sure which room was the drawing-room she was meant to go to.

Luckily, just as she descended the stairs, a maid with a tea tray appeared around the corner.

"Could you perhaps point me in the right direction, since it seems you are also headed that way?" Lady Louisa asked.

The maid smiled kindly at Lady Louisa and nodded her understanding. Without another word, Lady Louisa fell in step behind the maid. She paused for just a moment before the door as the maid walked in clinking cups and teapot in hand.

Lady Louisa hesitated as she peeked into the room. She could see

three ladies already seated. Lady Louisa could only assume it was her aunt and two cousins. She took a deep, steadying breath. Finding her stomach full of knots, she made her way into the room.

She stood before her aunt and cousins without introduction as the maid set down the tray. All three pairs of eyes looked at her rather skeptically. She felt like crumpling against the wall.

“I suppose punctuality is not something practiced or taught by my sister, the Dowager Countess,” Lady Hendrickson said looking reasonably bored with her niece.

“Forgive me, Aunt Sarah. I wasn’t told where or when you were expecting me.”

For a beat, silence filled the room. Lady Louisa was waiting for some kind of response and her aunt seemed to relish the awkward feeling it was giving her.

“Indeed,” Lady Hendrickson finally said. “You have quite a familiar tone with someone you are meeting for the first time.” She let out a long breath of distaste. “I suppose you should take a seat. I would rather not have my own garden statue in the middle of the room.”

Lady Louisa tried to laugh it off as if her aunt meant it as a joke. Her stone-cold face told her otherwise. Lady

Louisa had a feeling that mending any bond between the two families, or even creating a friendship between her two cousins, was going to be significantly harder than she had first hoped for.

“I expect you will be needing an introduction,” Lady Hendrickson said with a raised brow.

Lady Louisa couldn’t believe how much her aunt reminded her of her own mother in looks. Perhaps it was the fact that Lady Hendrickson was completely garbed in a black dress, as her mother had chosen since her own husband’s death.

It was more than that, however. Though Lady Hendrickson looked vastly more worn with age, and had a roundness that her mother was altogether lacking, it was still possible to pick out their similar blue eyes and matching golden hair. Unlike her mother who, even in her darkest times, had a glow in her eyes, Lady Louisa's aunt only seemed to have a face full of disdain and unhappiness. The lines of her displeasure ran deep along either side of her still plump cheeks.

"I think I can figure out names," Lady Louisa said as pleasantly as possible as she took a seat in a high back chair. "You must be Miss Elisabeth Hendrickson, and you Miss Mary," Lady Louisa said turning to each one of her cousins. She did her best to take note of the fact that Lady Hendrickson didn't seem to care for familiar terms between relations.

Though Mary gave her a soft smile, Elisabeth seemed to share in her mother's expression of abhorrence. It was easy to see that not only was her aunt going to be a difficult person to win over but her daughters also.

They stayed in the drawing room for the remainder of the afternoon and on into the evening. It was strange to Lady Louisa not to leave and dress for dinner. Since no announcement was made to do such, and neither of the other ladies said anything about it, she kept her mouth shut on the matter.

It seemed that Lady Hendrickson's need for propriety was most duplicitous and only mattered regarding Lady Louisa. As Lady Louisa spent the time either in awkward silence or answering loaded questions laced with disdain, she felt very much like the schoolgirl of her youth being tortured by the other students.

Lady Louisa couldn't quite imagine at that moment how she was ever going to make an extended stay here at Mentheith House. She felt no more welcome than a mouse looking for crumbs in the pantry.

Finally, Mr. Johnson entered the room. Lady Louisa took notice that both his hands were cleaned, thread barren coat brushed, and hair pulled back smoothly. She couldn't help but feel a little relieved when her aunt's scrutiny left her and turned on the poor groomsman.

"Have you no gloves?" Lady Hendrickson spat at the man. "After all we have a very fine guest with us tonight," she continued waving in Lady Louisa's direction.

"Oh, please aunt- I mean- Lady Hendrickson, I don't ask for any special treatment while I am here."

"Do you hear that girls?" Lady Hendrickson said turning to her two daughters. "Your cousin seems to be gracious enough to come down to

our level,” she said with a snake-like hiss.

“I only meant that I have come to assist you in any way I can. I do not wish to make more work for the household. It’s my goal to help you. After all, I too have felt the loss of my father. I know how it must tear at your hearts.”

Lady Louisa turned the last of her words to her cousins. She had to remind herself that they were going through a difficult time and much of her aunt’s negative disposition had to be the result of the current stress and grief she was under.

“How very magnanimous of you,” Lady Hendrickson drawled out before standing and calling her girls to follow her.

Lady Louisa stood shocked in her seat for just a moment at the cruel manners with which her aunt had already treated her. Surely her mother wouldn’t want to attempt to mend bonds when it seemed so clear that the other party involved had no wish to do so.

Her mind drifted to her mother at that moment, however. Yes, she was keeping busy and probably not wanting for much entertainment in her absence. She was however still very frail of spirit. Lady Louisa could only imagine the degree of hurt her mother would feel if she returned home without having accomplished her task.

If she couldn’t win over her aunt or cousins, it wouldn’t be for lack of trying. She was determined to stay the course if only for her own mother’s happiness.

Lady Louisa stood from her seat and quickly caught up to the swaying skirts of her two cousins to follow the procession to dinner.

“Did you mean what you said?” Lady Louisa’s aunt asked from her right side at the table. Lady Hendrickson had insisted that Lady Louisa sit at the head of the table.

“Forgive me, but mean what I said about what?”

Lady Hendrickson gave a puff of her cheeks in an exasperated tone like she was dealing with a stupid child. Lady Louisa could hear the covered giggles from her two cousins.

“That you are willing to help in any way you can?”

“Oh yes,” Lady Louisa said perking right up. She was hoping that this could perhaps be the opening she was looking for.

“Well, the house has always been short-handed. You see Mr. Hendrickson had promised me the world when we first met. This is all he seemed to be able to give, however,” Lady Hendrickson said with a wave of her hand at the room.

“Normally, the girls and I pick up and do the extra things that just can’t be accomplished by such a small household. Unfortunately, since my husband’s departure from this world,” Lady Hendrickson paused for a moment and dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief. “Well, neither the girls nor I have been up to it.”

“We barely manage to put ourselves right every day let alone the mountain of tasks piling up before us.”

Lady Louisa felt excitement inside her. This would be her chance to show her aunt that no hard feelings were harbored between the two families. She would do all that she could to get Mentheith House back on its feet.

After all was not charity the greatest love? Lady Louisa would show that she and her mother had high abounding love for this family, and in return she hoped the Hendricksons would again accept them into their lives. Lady Louisa was sure this was the last grievance her mother needed to fix in this life. She wasn’t willing to let her mother down.

By the end of dinner, Lady Louisa was high in spirits and full of tasks for the morrow. She thought it was quite a long list and figured it was only because all three would work together to accomplish the tasks.

Her first task would be to get the kitchen garden and medicinal gardens set to order. She actually didn't find this task too tedious and thought she might rather enjoy it. It was after all early enough in the spring that she might yet get a good yield for the dinner table.

In times past, she had helped her own gardeners tend to the small plots behind their London home and therefore had good knowledge on the matter. She had even made a bit of a hobby out of medicinal plants and their uses recently.

The second task on her long list was to retrieve parcels from the town that the women of the house were expecting. She worried more about this job as she had no familiarity with the area and she would be in public all on her own.

Perhaps her cousins would accompany her on this trip, and in that way, it would not be improper. But for a lady to walk to town and through shops without even a maid at her side was more than Lady Louisa had ever done in her life.

As much as Lady Louisa wanted to mention such concerns to her aunt, she also knew that she would no doubt be ridiculed for them. At every moment Lady Hendrickson strove to shovel words in Lady Louisa's mouth.

First, there was the instance in the drawing room. Then at dinner, she covered her insults with humility. Lady Hendrickson had initially commented on how the meal was no doubt distasteful to someone used to the finery of

London. Next, she remarked on how Lady Louisa must have chosen her most out of date gown so as not to make her cousins feel unfashionable.

All these comments, and so many more were all meant to belittle and embarrass Lady Louisa. She hated to admit it, but it was working.

That night before retiring to her bed in the small servant room meant

for two, Lady Louisa sat at the edge of her bed and did her best not to cry. She was sure in that moment she would have much preferred to be back at Mrs. Mason's School for Young Ladies and have her hair dipped in the inkwell than to have to spend another meal in the company of her aunt.

Lady Louisa's only solace was that if she just kept her head down and did the work asked of her as she had done in primary school, then it would all be over much quicker. Tomorrow she would have nothing but sunshine and a day in the garden to look forward to. With any luck that would also mean not having to be in her aunt's presence.

Chapter 4

Much to Lady Louisa's misfortune, luck didn't seem to be on her side. Though she did wake to a steaming hot basin of water and a simple but filling breakfast tray, things only seemed to go downhill from there.

Bess, the maid who regularly stayed in her room, was kind and chipper enough. She did her job efficiently and was quite skilled in dress and hair. Lady Louisa was sure Bess could best the skill of any lady's maid of London.

Bess also informed her that any plans of seeing to the needs of the garden were unlikely. The plots of land were normally taken care of by Mr. Hendrickson. His illness had come on three years ago, and as a result, he was unable to keep up with the work. He had suffered three long years in bed before his body gave up the spirit.

Any supplies that Lady Louisa would need in recreating the gardens would first have to be procured in the village.

Lady Louisa, always the one to see the bright side of things, took it as an opportunity to cross off other things on her list as she would spend the morning in town and hopefully have the afternoon to garden.

Sadly, Bess then informed Lady Louisa that such a trip would most likely take the whole of the day. The village was a two-mile walk. Bess offered for Lady Louisa to ride in the carriage instead.

Lady Louisa thought on this for a moment. Her aunt certainly knew how far the distance was. No doubt her aunt and cousins never walked the journey but rather rode in the carriage. Perhaps this was

yet another way for her aunt to single her out.

If Lady Louisa were to take the carriage as offered, then she was sure that night at dinner would be filled with talk on her overly delicate nature.

Unquestionably, the maids and men servants didn't take a carriage or horse into town, though. If they could walk the distance, she was sure she could manage it too.

She had spent many a season walking the trails in Hyde Park. How much harder could it be to walk a level path to a village?

"Actually, if you would be so kind to hand me my sunbonnet, I would rather enjoy the walk," Lady Louisa replied determinedly.

Bess looked at her with surprise through the reflection of the looking glass. She was a sweet enough looking girl in a rather dull brown muslin dress. For the most part, her conversation had been steady without any betraying emotions. That was up until this moment.

"I'm afraid, m'lady, that I might not be able to find someone to accompany you to the village."

"I assumed as much. I will go on my own. It is not dangerous here, is it?"

Bess gave a nervous laugh.

"Of course it isn't dangerous. I, myself, make the walk on my day off to visit with my mother. I only meant that it might not be...well..."

Bess hesitated to finish her sentence. It was not her place to tell Lady Louisa what was and wasn't proper to do. Bess seemed to feel her actions too impertinent already as it was.

"I appreciate your concern," Lady Louisa responded with a sincere heart, "but I am sure I will be just fine on my journey."

Bess hesitantly gave Lady Louisa easy directions to find her way to the village. Lady Louisa was sure of her own abilities and bravery, though up until this day bravery was not something she would have ever associated with her personality. Her confidence slowly faltered with each step she took on the path.

The country surrounding her aunt's house and fields more resembled an enchanted forest filled with deep dark secrets than the leisurely walk in the woods that Bess described.

Even with the sky blue and clear of clouds, when Lady Louisa left the house, she was now enshrouded by the darkness of high overarching tree branches. She shivered and pulled her shawl closer to her as she trudged down the road.

She was sure these paths were the old bandit trails from the fairy tales she read as a child. At any moment, one would jump out and take all she had. She was seriously reconsidering her determination and about to turn back when the sound of a horse echoed off the trees.

Lady Louisa moved to the side of the road and looked forward to the bend ahead, waiting for the rider to appear. From the sound, she was sure it was a single rider and no cart or carriage behind. Perhaps they would stop and inform her how much farther she had to go.

Lady Louisa was sure that if it was not much farther, she would be able to complete the rest of the journey. She was not surprised when it was a single rider coming around the bend but she was shocked to see his speed.

She took another step back to give the man the whole of the road as his heaving frothing steed pulled with all its might to reach its maximum ability. In the process of stepping back without looking, however, Lady Louisa stepped on the back of her hem and stumbled to the ground.

Lady Louisa hadn't expected the rider even to see her at his high speed, but apparently he did. What was worse, he saw her fall. He

pulled on the reins causing the horse to skid on the path and rear up in protest.

The rider must have been quite proficient for he didn't even lose control despite the animal's protest. Instead, he turned the beast around, dismounted, and walked it over to where Lady Louisa had fallen.

"I'm terribly sorry for the fright, miss. I am not used to seeing others on this path."

Lady Louisa looked up past her sunbonnet at the face of the man before her. He did seem sincere in his words, but the embarrassment was still fresh for her.

"I was under the impression that this was the path that leads to the village. One would think it would be used enough to encourage caution from riders," Lady Louisa said as she brushed the leaves and dirt from her dress.

Looking down, she could see the hem of her rose-colored dress was not only soiled with dirt, but also torn from her misstep on it.

"The village is just down the way and around the bend, however not much else is in that direction," he said pointing his leather gloved hand to the path she had already trodden.

"Well, my aunt's house is in fact in that direction," Lady Louisa said with a small hint of irritation.

"Oh, how wonderful. You must be a neighbor of mine. I've only taken residence a month ago at Bassen Park and have yet to meet all those around me. Are you familiar with the estate?"

"I am afraid not," Lady Louisa said truly having very little knowledge of anything past the road she now walked on. "I have only arrived myself just a day ago. I was on my way to the village to procure the necessities for a summer garden."

“How splendid,” he remarked seeming relieved that she was still whole in body as she stood before him and readjusted her bonnet. “So your aunt must work at one of the small houses along the path before Bassen Park. I believe there are only three,” he said more thinking to himself. “which one can I send a note to inquire about your health Miss...”

It wasn't the first time that Lady Louisa had been assumed to be a commoner. More often than not it was due to her very plain looks, for surely a member of the ton could not look as uninviting as did she. She also suspected the fact that she was soil covered and alone didn't hamper his first assumption.

Perhaps it was the way that her aunt had spoken to her the night before. It may have been because Lady Louisa felt shame in announcing that she was, in fact, a lady and should have been escorted, but more than likely she was just too embarrassed by her looks to correct the man.

“Bess, it is just Bess. I am staying at Mentheith House, but I pray you don't inquire. I assure you I am quite well,” Lady Louisa said.

“Well, just Bess,” the gentleman said with a tip of his hat and a twinkle in his clear emerald green eyes, “I am the Duke of Rowland. Please do come and inquire at my estate if you are in any need. I would be happy to oblige.”

Lady Louisa's mouth opened for just a moment in shock, but she quickly regained herself. She bowed to the Duke and kept her eyes on the ground. Finally, seeing there was nothing more he could do for the maiden, the Duke of Rowland mounted his stead and returned his way down the path at a much slower pace.

Lady Louisa, on the other hand, stood her ground for some time stunned by her action. Not only had she made a fool of herself she had also lied to the face of a Duke. What if he sent someone to inquire about her at Lady Hendrickson's house? How would she explain herself to both the man and her aunt?

Lady Louisa was so lost in her thoughts of those last few moments, and what consequences might result, that she hadn't even realized that she had turned the bend and was now following the path out of the forest and into the open air of the village.

With the return of the sunshine warming her skin, Lady

Louisa let her worries melt away. She couldn't help but feel accomplished as she made her way over the final hills and into the cobbled streets of the village.

Here people were busy with their own lives and didn't have time to notice or question her. For someone who endeavored to be unnoticed most of her life she rather found it refreshing.

Though it was a country village, it was still much more significant than Lady Louisa had expected. She easily found the central market from the calls of people and animals. Lady Louisa was overjoyed that she had arrived on what seemed to be Market Day.

Slowly Lady Louisa spent the late morning and early afternoon perusing the various vendors and wares. As she came to the end of the market, she found a vendor of gardening wares. Mostly it was annual bulbs for ladies to decorate their gardens with, but she did find some good kitchen garden seeds.

The vendor was also kind enough to point her in the direction of an apothecary where she might find her other items. As Lady Louisa made her way in that direction, she thought that she had already learned the basic layout of the village.

She took note of the fabric and notion store just outside of the main market. It was here that Lady Louisa was to pick up the parcels for her aunt. Lady Louisa stopped for a moment to examine the fine dresses and hats that adorned the windows.

She decided it must have been quite a skilled seamstress that resided there to make such perfect pleats in the window dress. It was

undoubtedly anything that might rival a store in London.

Though she didn't want to admit it, a part of her had expected that this county, so far removed from what she had known, would be behind in times and fashion. She was pleasantly surprised to see that up until this moment it was proving to be just as enjoyable as her hometown.

Lady Louisa thought back to the letters that she and the

Duchess of Wintercrest had exchanged. At the time, the Duchess was, in fact, the governess forced to leave the comfort of the city that they both loved.

Though Lady Louisa had done her best to stay positive for her friend, she was sure that her departure would end in a substandard living. Lady Louisa smiled to herself as she thought of those first few letters she had received. The duchess hadn't been too happy with her distant and lonely situation.

Now it had all worked out for her dear friend, and the duchess rather enjoyed her time in the country surrounded by her family. Lady Louisa had also visited Isabella from time to time. Never having left Wintercrest Manor, Lady Louisa had only assumed that the surrounding towns were less than up to snuff and that the duchess had merely made do with her surroundings.

One day in this small country village had already vastly changed her outlook on life outside of London. Up until this time she had never dreamed of living somewhere else and being as happy as she was at home. This country village seemed to give her many new possibilities.

Lady Louisa had collected all her necessary gardening products and placed them into a basket on her arm. Things were looking very pleasant until the time came for her to procure the parcels from the seamstress. They were not just a few notions, but actually, several dresses ordered.

Lady Louisa had no idea how she was meant to get these items home without the use of a carriage. Had she been in London it would be easy enough to call a hired coach to take her home. She had a sinking feeling that such a thing wouldn't be possible in her current situation.

Perhaps it was what her aunt wanted all along. In the current situation, she would have no choice but to return to her aunt's house having failed the task. No doubt Lady Hendrickson would make sure to point out her failure in front of her cousins.

Lady Louisa was determined to salvage this task somehow. She asked the seamstress if she had a cart that Lady Louisa might borrow.

"I am afraid not. Lady Hendrickson purchases items often from my shop, but has never sent Mr. Johnson without his own means of transport," the proprietor responded honestly.

Lady Louisa felt no surprise at this point that her errand had been a sham all along.

"Perhaps there is a public stall that I might rent one from?" Lady Louisa asked encouragingly.

"There is a public stall at the end of this street. It is more for storage

of animals and carts during events such as the market outside. I am sure it will be brimming with animals and buggies, but you may have a time finding someone willing to offer you theirs.”

Lady Louisa could tell that she was trying to be as helpful as possible. It seemed the circumstances were just not favorable.

“Perhaps I might go and inquire there first, and then come to collect the items. Of course, if that is all right with you?”

Lady Louisa did feel bad that the owner had just wrapped the packages and they were taking up an ample space of her storefront.

“It will be quite all right. I don’t mind keeping them. If you have no luck, I will just retire them to the back until you are able to pick them up at a later day. Lady Hendrickson and her daughters are some of my most frequent customers; it would not do if I couldn’t allow a little leeway for them from time to time.”

“I appreciate that,” Lady Louisa said making her way out of the dress shop.

She found the stalls just at the edge of the village. The barn did seem to be bursting with carts and animals, and she hoped that one might be able to give her the desired help.

A small stable boy was leaning against the building dozing in the warm sunlight as she approached him.

“Excuse me, might you help me procure a cart to Mentheith House this afternoon. I would be happy to compensate you for the effort as well as the effort of the driver.”

“Not many would be willing to go down that way, ma’am. Very few live there, and it’s awful far,” the boy said scratching his head.

“Yes, so I’ve been told,” Lady Louisa said as she irritably remembered her encounter with the Duke.

“Is there something I can assist with,” a deep male voice called from behind Lady Louisa.

She turned in her spot to find an older gentleman before her. He was dressed finely in a militia red coat and shining black high boots. He was handsome for a man older in years. Lady Louisa surmised that he must have been in his mid-forties by the grey streaks that ran on either side of his dark auburn hair.

“Yes,” Lady Louisa said with a slight bow. “I am Lady Louisa visiting with my aunt at Mentheith House. I came to town to pick up some parcels and fear that it is much more than I am able to carry on my return trip home. I was hoping to rent a cart.”

“Well how very fortunate of you. I just myself came from that direction to acquire some items from the market. I would be happy to escort you back home if you would allow me.”

“How very kind of you.”

“Don’t mention it. Colonel Hugh Jasper at your service,” he added with a deep bow and sincere smile.

A half-hour later Lady Louisa was sitting next to the Colonel in his country cart laden with both their items. It was a much more delightful ride back through the forest than the walk in the morning.

The sun was just beginning to set and orange, golden rays seemed to find a way to penetrate through the leaves in their downward angles. Before the forest seemed so terrifying and dark but now with her escort at her side, Lady Louisa felt altogether relieved.

The Colonel was very kind to make light conversation the whole way. It had to be the first time she felt some friendly conversation that didn’t seem full of with the double entendres of her aunt and cousins.

“You must let me repay you somehow for your service,” Lady Louisa said as they came out of the woods and Mentheith House could be

seen off in the distance.

“I wouldn’t think of such a thing. I am duty-bound to help a lady in need. In fact, I was rather glad to have the company myself. My companion had to leave quite suddenly and return to his estate this morning.”

“Perhaps you would join us for dinner tonight? I am sure my aunt would welcome the company and would want to thank you herself.”

“Well, I’ve never been one to turn down a meal. I am new to this county, as well, and it might do for me to make the acquaintance of some of the families here.”

“I am sure that my aunt, Lady Hendrickson, will be the perfect place for you to start. If I remember correctly the late Mr. Hendrickson’s family has resided at Mentheith House for four generations.”

“Then your aunt should know the area well. I am aiming for a bit of adventure while I am here.”

“Well both my mother and aunt were raised in this area, though I am not sure if they did much adventuring.”

“Nonetheless, since you have been so kind to ask me to dine, I shan’t refuse it.”

Lady Louisa wasn’t sure what bothered her aunt more, that she had in fact completed the task at the dress shop unhindered or that Lady Louisa had already made an acquaintance that Lady Hendrickson didn’t first know.

“Colonel Jasper you say,” Miss Elisabeth Hendrickson said as the three ladies sat around the drawing room not doing anything in particular when Lady Louisa arrived home.

“Yes. He was very kind to me. As I said, I invited him to dine with us. I suspected you, yourself, would have done the same, Lady

Hendrickson. He is currently in the library awaiting an introduction.”

“A Colonel, Mother. I bet he is unattached too,” Miss Hendrickson stated with excitement in her eyes.

“Remember yourself, Elisabeth,” her mother chastened.

Lady Louisa had thought it was to teach the girl some propriety and decorum. Certainly, she was only two years younger than Lady Louisa and should have known that giggling excitedly at the prospect of a suitor was unbecoming.

“We have our eyes set on a much better target,” Lady Hendrickson finished.

She didn’t want to say any more on the matter in front of present company, and Lady Louisa did her best not to be offended by this. Miss Mary also seemed to be quiet and reserved on this and just about every other matter. Lady Louisa found a bit of a kindred spirit in her ability to hold her thoughts close to her heart.

Seeing that there were no further objections to the Colonel staying for dinner Lady Louisa asked Bess, who was waiting just outside the drawing-room door, to show him in.

Colonel Jasper was very friendly with the present company and seemed to know how to keep conversations moving along smoothly.

“I was not aware that a regiment was in the area,” Lady Hendrickson said over dinner.

“I am not here with the regiment but rather on a bit of sabbatical.”

“Oh, are you visiting with family then? Perhaps we know them,” Lady Hendrickson continued.

“Actually, my parents died when I was young, ma’am. There was another gent in my similar situation at boarding school. We just stuck

together the two of us. He has been out of the country for some time, but he recently came back. He and his uncle have been my family, so it only seemed right that I take a holiday and help him acclimate back to normal life.”

“Acclimate? If I may ask, was your friend fighting in the war?” Lady Louisa asked thinking of her brother and the struggles he had after his time in the war.

“No, nothing like that. Actually, he was traveling the various regions of the empire. You would have to ask him which ones, it's far too many for me to remember. I believe the last was the Indies, though.”

“Forgive my asking,” Miss Mary said, “But perchance is your friend Henry Vaughan the Duke of Rowland.”

Miss Mary got a sharp look from her mother and then a darting look at Lady Louisa. It seemed that her aunt had no desire in telling her that the Duke was present in the area. Little did she know that Lady Louisa had already, quite literally, run into him.

“Why yes, it is,” the Colonel said with a light to his face. “Rowland has been hard to get away from his estate as of yet. He took a little ill with the change of atmosphere. I believe he only left Bassen today. News must travel fast here in the Lake District.”

“You would be surprised how fast it does travel,” Miss Hendrickson said as she too gave her sister an irritated stare.

“Well, I should suspect with two unattached females in the house, news of an eligible Duke in the vicinity wouldn't go unnoticed,” he added in the direction of Lady Hendrickson.

Lady Louisa decided that she liked Colonel Jasper very much. However, she was a little concerned that he was in close contact with the Duke of Rowland, a man with whom she had not only had a very embarrassing first meeting, but had also given a false name.

What would happen when Colonel Jasper returned to his friend's house this night and informed him of all the day's happening? Surely the Duke would not believe someone was visiting an aunt in service at the house as well as another niece to stay with the lady of the house.

She wondered if perhaps she should tell the Colonel all that had transpired. Though he was thin of frame, he was undoubtedly the jolly sort and might, in fact, find humor in her tale.

She looked between her aunt and cousins. Clearly, the

Duke of Rowland was the man alluded to earlier. Why Lady Hendrickson had hoped to keep it secret from her was a mystery.

Certainly a peerage member so close to her own family seat would mean there had to be connections between the two families. It would be to Lady Hendrickson's benefit to use her link.

It would be even more beneficial if she was, in fact, hoping to make a connection herself between the Duke and one of her daughters as the case seemed to be.

But then Lady Louisa remembered how much jealousy and hatred her aunt felt towards her parent's alliance.

Perchance it was in that spirit that her aunt hoped to shield Lady Louisa from all these doings. In that way, she could say that the deed was done without using the influence of Lady Louisa's family name.

She decided at that moment not to speak of the matter to the Colonel or find cause to meet with the Duke at all, for inevitably he would ask of her family and thereby gain that connection. Instead, she would do as her aunt wished and help in any way possible, even if that meant staying quietly to the side.

Lady Louisa for a moment smiled at that thought. It was surely the first time in her life that being a wallflower might have its benefits.

The following day Lady Louisa spent the whole of it under the warm sunshine as she prepared and planted the garden. She found it to be a most enjoyable task. She couldn't believe how invigorating and enjoyable the country air could be.

Even more enjoyable was the fact that she wasn't alone in her task. To her great surprise, when she announced that she planned to plant the garden that morning, Miss Mary asked to join her.

Though neither one was prone to much speaking, it was an enjoyable day spent working alongside each other. "My father used to keep the garden," Miss Mary said after a time. "Since he took ill a few years back, it just sat barren. It was such a sad sight to me."

"I believe Bess told me some of that. I am very sorry for your loss," Lady Louisa responded.

"Did you ever spend time here with him then?" Lady Louisa continued hoping to bring up happy memories for her cousin.

If she had learned one thing from the death of her father, it was that forgetting was not the remedy. So often when a loved one was lost, remaining family members would do all they could to forget the unhappy circumstances that lead to their death.

This would often result in the removal of anything that might remind one of the deceased person. In the end, all memories both happy and sad would be lost to them. Then all that would be left would be that empty sorrowful feeling of loss.

It was far better to suffer through the bad memories in order to hold on to the good. Only then could the pain lessen over time. Though Lady Louisa was sure that it would never go away completely, it certainly would be bearable.

“No. Mother never thought it quite proper for my sister or me to be out in the garden. She said it was servant work. I am actually a little surprised she didn’t object this morning.”

“Perhaps she changed her mind. Or perhaps she hoped to see the beauty of the gardens again as well.”

“I can’t imagine the second. Mother would be so cross with Father when he was out here in gardens. She would always comment how anyone could see him and it was so unbecoming of a gentleman to work as such.”

“My father though,” Miss Mary said rising and wiping her cheek with a dirty glove, “He would always say his father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather all stood in this same spot and dug around the same lettuce. He would not break such a tradition.”

Lady Louisa smiled as Miss Mary spoke the memory. For a moment she let her cousin drift off to another time before she shrugged and went back to the work of removing deep-rooted weeds.

“He sounds like a very determined man. I wish I could have been lucky enough to meet him,” Lady Louisa said before returning to her own particularly stubborn weed. “Would you tell me more about him?” Miss Mary paused for just a second.

“It’s funny; Mother barely liked the subject of him while he was with us. Since his departure from this world, I honestly thought she would be happier. She speaks of him even less however and seems even more sullen.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lady Louisa said with truth.

She had heard from her own mother that her aunt and uncle's relationship was strained over time. It must have been a terrible thing for her aunt to choose love and then lose it in the end.

In truth, Lady Louisa wondered if it was her own aunt's pride and jealousy that had not only severed the ties with her sister, but her husband as well.

"I, however, would be more than happy to speak about him," Miss Mary said with a little spunk.

The two ladies spent the remainder of the afternoon covered in soil swapping stories of both their fathers now gone. It was a most pleasant and therapeutic experience for the both of them.

"My word," said a deep voice coming from around the house and walking along the white picket fence that encased the two garden plots.

Lady Louisa and Miss Mary stood to find Colonel Jasper watching them with a teasing gleam in his eye.

"Lady Hendrickson informed me that I might find you two out in the garden, I had no idea she meant that you would be more covered in soil than the last time we met," he continued.

Both ladies quickly stood, a little embarrassed at the current status of their soiled hems. Miss Mary even had a smudge of dirt on her cheek from where she wiped it earlier.

"I can safely say, neither one of us was expecting company in our present condition," Lady Louisa replied as she tipped back her sunbonnet and removed her gardening gloves.

Miss Mary was nervously doing the same. Though she did do her best to brush the dirt off of her apron, she still had no knowledge of the offending smudge on her now rosy cheeks.

Though Miss Mary was no match for her older sister's beauty, she was very pretty in her own way. Even with the heat of the day on her face and the strenuous work deflating the curls of her golden hair, she still outshined Louisa in looks.

"Well I do beg pardon for the intrusion," Colonel Jasper said with a bow. "Rowland was most anxious to meet the family I spoke so highly of all night long upon my return. I dare say members here shared the same sentiment," he added with a wink.

"I would be more than happy to introduce you two ladies, as well?"

"I thank you," Lady Louisa said quickly remembering her self-promise to give her cousin space on this matter, "but I am sure another opportunity will arise. Hopefully at that time I will be more properly dressed for it," she added with a cool smile.

"Of course. Well, I am not offended by your hard work. Perhaps you wouldn't mind showing me around the outside grounds while the others speak inside. It is far too fine of a day to waste it," Colonel Jasper said.

Lady Louisa looked to Miss Mary waiting for her to respond. It didn't seem that Miss Mary was used to making such decisions so instead, Lady Louisa made it for the both of them.

"We would both be delighted to, though I will have to defer all leading and talking to my cousin as I know the land no better than yourself."

Miss Mary was happy to lead both around the grounds and show the various highlights. At first, she was very timid on the matter. Colonel Jasper would ask her little encouraging questions all the while, however, and soon Miss Mary needed no prompting in the discussion.

By the time the sun was starting to set in earnest, Lady Louisa couldn't help but hold back from the party with a smile as the two in front of her engaged in conversation. Both were enthralled with the current

discussion of prevalent wildflowers versus ones planted in gardens.

“I don’t think there is anything more wonderful than to walk down a path and come upon a meadow of freshly bloomed wildflowers,” the Colonel debated.

“Although such a thing is a beautiful site, I would have to argue that one can find more happiness in a bloom of your own doing. In fact, my father used to say that it was the toiling and hard labor put into a plant that made its fragrance so sweet.”

“What a lovely sentiment,” Colonel Jasper said with his eyes lowered down to Miss Mary. “One that is truly hard to argue with.”

Lady Louisa had never expected her cousin to have such an interest in the outdoors before this day’s interaction. Now she had a feeling that Miss Mary had a great many interests that she kept hidden away upon request of Lady Hendrickson.

“Pray tell, what lovely flowers will waft up beautiful perfume from your labors today?”

“Nothing really,” Miss Mary confessed. “I have but planted lettuce and root vegetables. My cousin, Lady Louisa, was the one to plant the herbs and medicinal plants. I suspect they will create a much better sight to see.”

Both eyes turned to Lady Louisa as if they had remembered her presence for the first time. Rather than being upset that she was forgotten, Lady Louisa rather liked how well the two were getting along.

“I suppose the only fragrance of pleasure from the medicinal garden would be the lavender and rose hips,” Lady Louisa supplied to their questioning looks.

“Both lovely choices for growing and uses, I must say,” Colonel Jasper said making sure to include her in the conversation again.

Lady Louisa couldn't help but notice that there had to be almost twenty years between her young cousin and the Colonel but the two seemed quite well matched for each other. She had never considered herself to be a matchmaker, but in this instance, she might make an exception. The two seemed to make a very handsome couple.

"Why did you two never come in?" Miss Hendrickson said that night over their family meal. "I expected that once Colonel Jasper informed you of our guest, you would have straight away come to meet the Duke."

"We were not presentable after a day working in the garden," Miss Mary stated merely not wanting to say more on the matter.

"Then what were you up to?" Lady Hendrickson said with a narrowing of her eyes.

"Colonel Jasper expressed a desire to know more of the area, so we took a turn with him around the gardens and property," Lady Louisa responded.

"You two would rather walk around outside with an old man than meet the very eligible Duke of Rowland?" Miss Hendrickson said with a scoff. "You really are dull of mind, Mary. No matter, I had no problem keeping the Duke entertained all on my own," she added with her head held high.

Even Lady Hendrickson beamed with pride at this fact. Though it was all meant as hurtful comments towards her and Miss Mary, Lady Louisa couldn't help but be at least satisfied in doing what she suspected her aunt and cousin had wanted of her.

"Louisa," Lady Hendrickson said. "I was wondering if you would be so kind as to help Bess tomorrow with the mending?"

"Of course Lady Hendrickson," Lady Louisa said.

"And then there are the new dresses that need to be tried and fitted

before the mending. I am sure you are more than skilled in such works, it would be a shame not to get your expertise on the matter.”

“I would be happy to help.”

“Wonderful, dear,” Lady Hendrickson said in a dismissive tone.

Lady Louisa was beginning to feel that each day of her visit was going to be filled with such tasks from her aunt.

Lady Louisa wasn't surprised when the following week she was again asked to go to the market on foot. At least this time she was not alone as Bess was at her side.

Lady Hendrickson insisted that Lady Louisa accompany the maid as she made her monthly walk to town to sell butter at the market.

Lady Louisa didn't mind the task as she rather enjoyed the morning talks with her maid and expected her day trip to be no less enjoyable. Lady Louisa was also looking forward to the chance to get another look at all the stalls on Market Day.

As they walked, Lady Louisa learned how each morning and evening the milk was collected from three cows that had a permanent residence in the barn. Then Bess, as well as the other maids, would let the cream separate and then turn it into butter.

Each pad of butter was salted, and molded into decorative wooden molds with various flower motifs on top. Once prepared they were wrapped in cheesecloth and placed in the root cellar until their designated market day each month.

Mr. Johnson, who was normally somewhat disheveled from his hard labor around the estate, was dressed in his Sunday best that morning as he took the rest of the goods into town in a cart. The butter needed to wait until later in the day when the height of commerce began. In that way, it didn't spoil or melt in the heat of the sun.

"People come from far off villages, m'lady, just for this here butter. In fact, I was even told that the Duke 'imself had it on his table since he

arrived.”

“May I ask what makes yours so unique?” Lady Louisa questioned as they made their slow stroll through the tree covered forest.

“Some say it’s just because it is pretty. Others will tell that it’s on account of the feed the cows get. See we don’t let them graze willy-nilly as most other folks do. The milk can change in taste by what she’s been eating. Our girls get only sweet barley from our very own fields.” “How interesting,” Lady Louisa said.

She could tell by the way Bess had her chin held high and was also wearing her Sunday best, that this was a production of love and pride. She suspected that Bess was about Miss Mary’s age and showed the signs of her youthful vigor as they trudged along on the path. Even her brown hair seemed to gleam in the light breaking through the trees as if it had its own supply of energy.

Lady Louisa looked up her nose at her own grey blonde hair that was placed so perfectly onto of her head with delicate ringlets shaping her face. How she wished her own hair glowed and emanated light as did Bess’s.

She couldn’t help but think at that moment, with Bess in her finest and her in a walking dress, it much rather looked like she was the Lady’s Maid and Bess was the Lady. She shook the thought out of her head. It was an awfully silly thing to think that clothes alone could determine one’s status from the outside, for surely Bess was a commoner but her looks and high-held head that day made her out to be the Queen of England herself.

“I suspect I will have to sneak a small amount on a biscuit before the day is out to determine if I agree with the superior taste,” Lady Louisa finally said in a joking manner.

“By, m’lady, you’ve had it all these days with meals. Tis’ the same we serve in the house.”

“I know, but I didn’t realize its importance then and took it for granted. I will have to try it again with this new knowledge, for certainly, that will make a difference.”

Both girls continued such conversation as they made their way through the forest and into the village. Lady Louisa found the trip to be most enjoyable and spent the whole of the day there with Bess.

Much to her surprise, people seemed to flock to their stall as soon as they arrived with their baskets of butter. Some had even been waiting the whole of the morning with one eye on the stall for Bess’ appearance.

It was strange for Lady Louisa to see that just about everyone knew each other by name. Indeed, in London there would be specific markets or even stalls and shops that might be favored, but rarely did a proprietor know the name of every single customer that walked through the door.

This seemed to be the case of this small village. With each client that came to the stall, either Mr. Johnson or Bess spoke a few words with them. Often inquiries were made about family members, and gossip exchanged.

Lady Louisa enjoyed watching and taking in all the close familiarities. It was unquestionably much friendlier than things back home. She was surprised when the conversation turned to her.

“Lady Louisa?” A voice called and waved at her from the other end of the stall.

It quite startled her since she hadn’t expected to know anyone here.

“Yes, that is me,” she said a bit shyly.

“I thought I recognized you,” the portly older man said coming to her side. “I dare to believe you don’t remember me.”

“I do apologize for that,” Lady Louisa said as she searched her brain for any recognition of the man.

“I am Mr. Henderson, your brother’s solicitor.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Lady Louisa now having a name to the face she remembered him well.

He had dined with her family on two separate occasions while her brother prepared for his journeys to America.

“I never imagined meeting you here,” he said with a jolly laugh.

“Nor I you,” Lady Louisa agreed. “I am here visiting with my mother’s sister.”

“Ah yes, Lady Hendrickson. No relation to me I’m afraid,” he added with a wink and a twitch of his nose. “Though I did know her late husband well.”

“You did?” Lady Louisa said surprised.

“Ah, yes,” Mr. Henderson said leaning back on his haunches. “Come and let us have some luncheon together, and I will tell you all about it.”

Louisa had to agree she was beginning to feel quite hungry after the long walk and days efforts. She couldn’t imagine a better companion either than this jolly gentleman who just might shed a little more light on her aunt’s situation.

“I would appreciate that very much,” Lady Louisa agreed, coming from behind the stall and taking the solicitor’s arm.

They walked a short distance down the lane and arrived at a rather quaint looking tavern. Inside it was just as simple and small as it looked from the outside. Mr. Henderson explained that it was the only establishment without a bar present thereby making it the only

appropriate one. He assured her the tea was always fresh and the biscuits and iced rolls that accompanied it came from a fine bakery next door.

“Have you known my aunt and her family long?” Lady Louisa asked after they were both comfortably seated at a wooden table next to the still cool hearth. Their seats did, however, have the only view out the sole window. Lady Louisa was thankful for the rays of light it brought in and warmed her with.

“I grew up here same as Billy,” Mr. Henderson said.

“Billy?”

“Oh, Mr. Hendrickson. In fact, I knew your mother and aunt as well, since they didn’t live too far off from this place. In fact, both regularly came to the village on Market Day to see the wares. I think it was also to do a little socializing with us regular folk as well.”

“I had no idea,” Lady Louisa said leaning forward enthralled with his tale. “I knew my father’s country seat is not far off, but since I myself never spent much time in the country, I had no knowledge of my mother’s childhood in this area.”

“Oh yes. She was a wonderful lady. My parents own some fields on her father’s land. When I showed great marks in school, your grandfather paid for my further education. He was a wonderful man.”

“I unfortunately never met my grandfather, though my mother spoke of him often.”

“Yes, he was a good man. Though,” he added with a shade coming over his face, “I suspect Lady Hendrickson doesn’t share that sentiment.”

“Yes,” Lady Louisa said, a little embarrassed for her aunt that this man seemed to know her business. “I know she didn’t feel she was justly treated upon his death.”

The man shrugged as if this was common knowledge. Lady Louisa thought back to her morning in the market and then suspected it, in fact, was common knowledge.

“But she married for love, and there must be solace in that happiness,” Lady Louisa said always looking for the silver lining.

“Perhaps,” Mr. Henderson said, and Lady Louisa guessed he knew how unhappy the relationship turned over time.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Lady Louisa shifted the topic, “I wonder if you could tell me some of my late uncle. I never had a chance to meet him myself, you see. Miss Mary has shared some things, but I fear it is still fresh and painful for the whole household.”

“He was a good friend of mine growing up,” Mr. Henderson said happy to talk about past memories. “We went to grammar school together. I can’t say he was as good as me,” he added with another teasing wink, “but he was sufficient for his needs.”

“He was, however, a dashing handsome man,” the solicitor continued. “All the girls had their eyes on him. It was no surprise that your aunt gravitated to him time and time again. Not only when their father would allow them to market, but also every Sunday after the parish service.”

“I honestly can’t say I was surprised to hear they eloped. Everyone knew she was promised to the Earl and that she had eyes for Billy,” he continued as he thought back on the memories.

“I suppose we all thought it a win for love and all that.” “But it wasn’t?” Lady Louisa asked.

“Well, I think at first they were very happy. Even when your mother and father married it made no matter to your aunt for she had her own happiness. I think over time, however, the magic of new love wears off and your aunt missed the life she had once been accustomed to.”

"I only knew about your grandfather's decision to remove her from his will because your mother had been kind enough to recommend me as solicitor to your father. It was a very ironic situation."

"In what way?" Lady Louisa asked.

"Well your aunt married for love and happiness, and in the end, I dare say she didn't have much of either. Your parents on the other hand, from the outside at least, married for family connections. I don't know that I ever saw a couple more in love or happier with each other all the way to the end."

Lady Louisa smiled with glistening tears as she too thought of the happy memories she shared with her parents. They really had loved each other dearly. Her father had been such a happy man and always seemed to light every room he entered with his teasing mannerism.

"There is no use dwelling on the past, though," he said with a wipe of his handkerchief to his nose. "Tell me how your brother is finding America."

Lady Louisa quickly brushed her own tears away and relaxed into a smile at the change of conversation.

"As well as can be. We have only received three letters as of yet. Perhaps Mother has received another one since my departure from London. They are both doing very well. The baby was a healthy boy. They only wait now for the child to grow in age a bit more before they can bring him across the sea."

"How wonderful," Mr. Henderson agreed. "I had heard some news in a letter from the earl that they planned to extend their stay due to his wife's condition. I am glad it worked out well. I won't be surprised if they decide to stay there forever. Virginia is a beautiful country."

"You really think they might?" Lady Louisa said shocked as the idea came to her for the first time since their departure.

It was true that when Colton had first told of his plans to journey to the property in the Americas Lady Louisa thought her brother might leave and never return this time. After he acquired his beautiful bride before he left, Lady Louisa did not doubt that at least Abigail would have the desire to return.

But now that she thought the matter over truly, she considered Abigail's own free spirit. Perhaps the two of them would love the new land so much they would have no desire to leave. Would she never set eyes on her dear brother or his family again?

"I don't see why they wouldn't," Mr. Henderson said. "It is a fine estate. You must go and visit them some time. Had I not gotten so old so quickly, I would have tried to make a last go of it and stay permanently myself."

"What an interesting idea," Lady Louisa said politely while she inwardly felt herself twist in turmoil.

Lady Louisa thought on the solicitor's words as she walked quietly back down the path with Bess and towards home. She couldn't help but feel a deep rock in the pit of her stomach.

Of course, she knew her brother would marry one day, start a family of his own, and in essence have a life of his own. She had never thought to be so separated from him by a whole ocean. She had been so close to him as children and up until his time in the regulars.

She had wished so dearly for that relationship to restart after his return. When Colton struggled so with readjusting into society with his injuries, she feared she had lost him altogether.

A new-found hope had grown with his love for Abigail. With her, Colton was able to be a bit of himself again. Lady Louisa had seen the change over their time spent together. She was sure she would again have that close friend and brother she had grown with.

Now they were gone and quite possibly permanently. It made Lady Louisa feel so utterly alone in the world. A part of her always knew something like this would happen. First, it was her best friend Isabella. Now it seemed that Colton was out of her life too.

Though Lady Louisa and Isabella still wrote and kept in touch, things were different now. After all, she had a growing family to take care of.

Now her brother had gone so far away from her that even written correspondence wasn't a very reliable tool.

She had accepted the fact that she was not the one to find a match of

her own. She didn't have the looks nor personality to stand out in the eyes of any suitor of the ton. She had never minded that believing that she would always have her family around her.

That no longer seemed as sure a possibility as she once thought. What would she do if she found herself without family? Naturally, her mother wouldn't be around forever. Isabella would be happy to take her in, but would she ask that burden of a friend.

Life seemed to be getting increasingly dreary with every step she took. So lost in her thoughts, Lady Louisa didn't hear the sound of a carriage coming. It was only when Bess grabbed her arm and yanked her to the side that she was awakened from her thoughts.

A basket gig with single rider was coming down the lane. Lady Louisa looked up in time to see the rider, and her heart fell even farther. It was clear he was also coming to a stop.

"We have to stop meeting like this, Miss Bess," the Duke said parking his gig on the side of the road and coming down to greet the two ladies.

First Bess, at Lady Louisa's side, looked very confused having never met the man in the first place, let alone along a roadside. Luckily Lady Louisa had the sense to intercede before anything could be done on the matter.

"Your Grace, I must confess that last week when we met on the road I was a bit frazzled and may not have given you accurate information," Lady Louisa said doing her best to hide her embarrassment over the fact.

"I'm not sure I understand," the Duke said with a furrow of his black brows as he looked between the two ladies. "Well, it's very hard to explain," Lady Louisa said with a nervous laugh. "I was just so flustered; I might not have actually given you my name. I am visiting my aunt, but when you made assumptions about my status I didn't want to be rude and correct them, so I gave you my lady's maid's

Christian name,” Lady Louisa did her best to explain as she motioned over to Bess next to her.

He looked between the two for the briefest of moments. Lady Louisa would have rather buried herself in the ground right there at the edge of the road than to half to explain her silly action to the man.

“That does make some sense then,” he finally said rubbing his hand along his chin as he thought it over.

Lady Louisa looked up at him in utter surprise at his words. She was caught in the deep green of his eyes.

“When I came to call on Lady Hendrickson she mentioned a niece visiting. I couldn’t believe that both the lady of the house and one of the household could have a visiting relative all at the same time.”

“You must beg my pardon, Your Grace,” Lady Louisa said. “I didn’t mean to confuse you. I was just startled at our last meeting.”

“Well, it is as much my fault as yours. In fact, you must allow me to beg your pardon again for last we met on this road. It was a rakish thing for me to do, running you out of the lane.”

“Perhaps I might make it up to you by offering you and Miss Bess,” he said motioning to Lady Louisa’s company, “a ride for the remainder trip home.”

“That is very kind, Your Grace. Normally I would respectfully decline, but since we are coming on late in the day, it might be nice to hurry our way home.”

Both ladies climbed into the back of the basket and seated themselves while the Duke took his place at the reins again. It was a small gig and scarcely enough room for the three to avoid touching each other in such close quarters.

The Duke was sure, however, to make the ride slow and smooth as

possible on a dirt road. While they started their journey, Lady Louisa wondered how her aunt and cousin would feel with her arrival in the Duke's gig. It was not what they would want, and went against her promise to help them.

On the other hand, the man had considered her a servant at the first. Plainly her cousin would see no threat in her. If anything, Lady Louisa could use the opportunity to gain stronger ties between the Duke and Mentheith House thereby increasing her cousin's chances.

"My aunt told me that you have spent many years abroad?" Lady Louisa asked.

"Yes," he responded as he kept his hands steady on the reins. "For the most part, I was in the Indies."

"It must have been very exotic," Lady Louisa commented as she studied his still bronzed stature.

"I have to say I did enjoy it greatly. I rather thought of it as home. I've only returned on insistence from my Uncle. I dare say he didn't love the land as much as I did and was insistent we both return."

"How very unfortunate for you, though. Do you plan to return to the Indies?"

"I suppose it would all depend?"

"Depend on what, Your Grace?" Lady Louisa asked not understanding.

"Well, surely you know why my uncle convinced me to return. I suspect the whole county has talked over the matter. I am in want of a wife apparently. I would assume it is because my own parents were only five years past my current age when they departed this world. It has caused my uncle to pressure me into producing an heir."

"Oh, I see." Lady Louisa said trying not to blush at the intimate conversation. Though if the whole county knew this fact perhaps it

wasn't that intimate at all.

"So, it will depend on my wife and her willingness to travel to the Indies or be left behind I suppose."

"You don't seem too happy about it, Your Grace. Though I am not an expert on the matter, only knowing what I have seen of the season in London, most find their years of courtship and searching for a match very exciting."

"No, I must confess I am not thrilled on the matter at all," the Duke agreed. "It's a very wasteful use of time if you ask me. If I were to meet a match in life, I would not be opposed to it, but I don't currently find myself in need of a female companion. Now I feel as if I am the one being hunted than on the hunt myself."

"Well, I cannot deny the truth of that statement, Your Grace," Lady Louisa agreed. "You are a single, able-bodied, high-titled gentleman. I expect you will get more than your fair share of mothers inflicting their daughters on you."

"And what of you Lady Louisa?" the Duke asked turning to face her head on as they started to clear the woods.

"Should I expect your mother shoving you my way. Should I prepare now for your impending hunt?"

"No, not at all!" Lady Louisa responded quickly.

She saw his shocked looked. Though of course, he wouldn't expect her to agree with his teasing, obviously a fast and loud denial wasn't what he had in mind either.

"I only mean, Your Grace," Lady Louisa quickly corrected. "That I am sure you have many fine choices already before you. It wouldn't even be worth throwing my number in the hat. Plus, my mother has chosen to stay behind in London, so I am without a matriarch to encourage me to do so."

“Well there is always Lady Hendrickson,” the Duke responded as he turned back to the road, satisfied with her explanation. “I believe she is primed and ready for the task.”

“With two single daughters of her own, I suspect my aunt will have ample choices to steer you into her grasp,” Lady Louisa said back in teasing fashion.

“Rightly so. Perhaps though,” the Duke asked as a thought came to his mind. “Perhaps I could turn to you for rescue when the lioness seems too much? After all, you have proclaimed no interest in me. If you were willing, I would be most grateful if I could hide behind your skirts from time to time?” Rowland said with a sideways wink.

Lady Louisa seemed to consider this for a moment. She wasn’t sure how happy her aunt would be if the Duke fell to her for a confiding friendship during his time looking for a wife. That being said, it was also a more significant tie to her cousins. Perhaps she could use her influence of the Duke to direct him in the right path.

Her head seemed to rattle with the wheels of the gig as she let these thoughts turn in her mind. It was so difficult to build plots for connections when it was not at all in her nature. She truly was not the matchmaker at heart finding these games all too much for her taste.

None the less, she would do whatever seemed right to see to her aunt's happiness. Even then, if she were to influence the Duke toward them, her aunt might then forgive the rift in the family and let bygones be bygones.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you or impose,” the Duke said after a few moments without Lady Louisa’s answer.

“No, not at all. I would be happy to help, Your Grace, in any way possible. I must admit my mother was rather hopeful that I find a gentleman who would be interested in me. I would be happy to allow you to, how did you say it? Hide behind my skirts to protect you from the Matriarchs if you don't mind me writing my own mother and

telling her that I have had conversations with the Duke of Rowland.”

"Well, it seems to be the perfect situation for the both of us then,"
Rowland said much satisfied with his new acquaintance.

Chapter 9

“Was that the Duke of Rowland I saw?” Miss Hendrickson said with her eyes narrowed on Lady Louisa.

Lady Louisa had barely said goodbye to the gentleman and walked in the door before she was pounced on by her cousin. Lady Louisa suspected from her entrance into the foyer she had come from the drawing room. It had a rather large window that opened to the front garden and with that a perfect view of the road and any who might ride on it.

“Why yes, it was,” Lady Louisa said calmly as she ignored her cousin’s dagger stare. “He was on his way home from the market and came upon Bess and me. He was most gracious to offer us a ride home.”

Lady Louisa delicately removed her walking gloves and bonnet and gave them along with her basket to the waiting Bess.

“Well, what did he say? Did he speak of me?” Miss Hendrickson said with hands on her narrow hips.

“We spoke about many things,” Lady Louisa said not wanting to specifically say how the Duke had detested the idea of ladies flocking around him in hopes to snag a marriage contract.

“Don’t be so forthcoming all at once,” Miss Hendrickson said with a flick of her chestnut hair before turning and entering the drawing room.

Lady Louisa had rather hoped to retire upstairs and freshen up some after the day’s events. She knew dinner would be served soon and was

so used to the custom of dressing for it. It was more than habit that caused her to want to remove to her room.

She was still in her walking dress, and rather soiled at that from the day's journey. She could only imagine the state of her chignon as she could already see the small dishwater ringlets that once encircled her face now just laying long and limp along either side of her cheeks.

"Louisa," her aunt called from the drawing room. "Louisa. Come here right now!"

Lady Louisa did her best to ignore her aunt's tone or the way she called her so informally when Louisa was technically her superior.

"Yes, Aunt Sarah," Lady Louisa said making a point with her own informality.

"Lady Hendrickson if you please," her aunt said with hurried speech as she waved her fan before her. "Elisabeth tells me it was the Duke that gave you a ride home."

"Yes," Lady Louisa said.

Most times Lady Louisa could have been said to have ample amounts of kindness and charity toward others no matter their own manner of treatment to her. At this particular moment that was not the case. Lady Louisa was tired, hungry, and worn from the day's journey.

Lady Louisa took a seat in an embroidered high back chair seeing that she would not get the luxury of retiring to her room before dinner. She looked around the room waiting for what was to come.

All three ladies seemed to be seated comfortably in the drawing room and, from the state of disheveled ribbons, tea dishes, and books, Lady Louisa didn't expect they had left since she saw them this morning.

Lady Henderson was still garbed in all black, though Lady Louisa noticed it was the new dress she had just carted from town. Unlike

most in mourning who wore simple black frocks, Lady Henderson had chosen a current style cut with a high empire waist, capped sleeves and a black lace trim around the edges that matched the one on her black sheen morning cap.

Both Miss Elisabeth and Miss Mary were also wearing their new dresses. Lady Louisa knew these very well as she was the one to hem the bottoms over the last week. She had a terrible time with Miss Elisabeth who had opted for a dress with a pleated back to her skirt. Though they were both cotton dresses used for morning and day wear, as was their mother's, both were done with intricate detail.

Miss Elisabeth had chosen a garment in the most exquisite cream with blue corn stripes running down the length of it. It did wonders to accentuate her long, perfectly shaped form and make her brown curls and cream skin beam against the lightness of the color.

Miss Mary, on the other hand, chose a lemon yellow dress with a simple large pink silken ribbon at her high waist. Unlike her sister who sought contrasting colors, Miss Mary had a perfect match to her warm textured skin and hair and rather muted to a beautiful color altogether.

Lady Louisa looked down at her hands folded in her own walking dress. Though it wasn't thread bare and not too terribly stained at the hem, it was still a plain shape with a matching Spencer jacket in the color of a hen's rustic feathers.

Suddenly seeming completely outshined by every other member of this room Lady Louisa lost all nerve to speak boldly to her aunt in her state of malnutrition.

Lady Hendrickson seemed to see the defeat for her satisfaction reflected back in her own blue eyes. She held her chin up high and snapped her fan promptly shut.

"Well then, out with it. We must know every word spoken between you and the Duke. I don't want him surprising us with some

conversation you had on our part or worse words you may have offended him with.”

“I am quite able to hold a civilized conversation,” Lady Louisa said reassuringly.

When she saw that this was not satisfying enough, she did her best to retell the short ride home in the Duke’s presence. She made sure to skim over any information her aunt and cousins might not be particularly happy to hear.

“So the Duke is feeling the pressure of making a match,” Lady Hendrickson said to her daughters when the whole telling was over.

“That means there are several other ladies already making a move to him. No doubt you have higher precedence over any commoner in the area,” she said waving away the idea like it was an irritating insect. “However, several lesser peerages may find a reason to settle in nearby residences all for the chance to secure his hand.”

She looked between her two daughters who were both listening intently. Lady Louisa suspected that such educational lessons from their mother were a frequent occurrence.

“What do you propose we do, Mother?” Miss

Hendrickson said sitting at the edge of her seat.

She was far beyond ready to do anything that her mother might deem necessary to attain the goal set before her. Lady Louisa saw her hungry eyes and instead thought that setting up such a man with her cousin might not entirely be in his interest. Had she just not just promised the Duke to do what was possible to help him sift the wheat from the chaff?

She honestly felt no loyalty to an aunt who had continued to show her contempt during her presence, but she did have a responsibility to her mother. The Dowager Countess was desperate for some kind of

reconciliation with her sister. Her mother knew very likely it would not happen at her hand but at Lady Louisa's. For the second time that day she felt racked with turmoil.

"Well it is good that he came here on his own accord the other day," Lady Hendrickson said with a wink of her eye and a knowing wag of her finger. "We have made connections to those close to him, this Colonel Jasper."

Lady Hendrickson stood and paced the room while she thought the matter over.

"I am told he lives with a single uncle as well. I believe it was his father's younger brother."

"Yes," Lady Louisa chimed in. "His grace told me how his uncle raised him after his parent's untimely death."

All parties in the room seemed to ignore her helpful comment except for Miss Mary who gave her a sideways glance and half smile. She looked to say that any input from the two of them at this time was wholly disregarded as the other two were bent on their scheming.

"It wouldn't be unwise to continue to grow friendships with this Colonel and uncle," Lady Hendrickson said as her mind was made up, though she waved off their names as if they mattered little.

"There is the public ball tomorrow," Miss Elisabeth chimed in.

She had sat bolt upright in the excitement of the idea, but then quickly looked over at Lady Louisa as if she had not meant to speak of such things in her presence. Contrary to what Miss Elisabeth thought, Lady Louisa was aware of the event.

At least every person who came to the market stall that day had spoken excitedly of it. Lady Louisa had been a bit surprised not to hear of it from her own aunt and relations.

Certainly, social events were not as common as in town and each one a wonderful opportunity. Lady Louisa had finally surmised that perhaps her aunt was refusing the attendance of such gay events on account of her still mourning.

“Naturally, the Duke would not attend such an event,” Lady Hendrickson spoke as she put the plan together. “But no doubt at least the Colonel will. It would be a ripe opportunity to suggest a more intimate setting in which we may get Elisabeth closer to the Duke’s acquaintance.”

“I would be more than happy to suggest a family dinner with the Colonel, and of course the rest of his party, should we find ourselves on the dance floor together tomorrow evening,” Miss Elisabeth said with all the charm of a snake.

The only thing that Lady Louisa detested more than the prideful air of her cousin’s speech was the sorrowful effect it had on Miss Mary. Miss Elisabeth undoubtedly expected to be the belle of the ball and able to get any gentleman to agree to any suggestion made by herself.

Why she had fixed her eyes on the man with whom Miss Mary had shared a most wonderful afternoon was beyond Lady Louisa’s comprehension. But then she didn’t have a sister of her own and perhaps it was the natural course of sibling rivalry.

“Splendid!” Lady Hendrickson said with a clap of her laced hands.

“You will encourage the Colonel to join us for a family meal. Oh, let us make it a picnic. They are quite fashionable these days.”

“Then,” Lady Hendrickson continued, “they will have no choice but to section off the whole of a day to our family. The Duke will scarcely forget my daughters after a whole afternoon in your presence,” she said looking first at Elisabeth then Mary.

“Oh, I do hope you won’t be so sullen, Mary. You always look like you are about to cry out of those doe eyes. Do try and appear happy,” her

mother scolded her.

Lady Louisa looked over at Miss Mary, who did look like she was about to cry. Lady Louisa wasn't sure if it was just her delicate nature or the fact that her sister had just announced to set herself on Colonel Jasper.

"We will need new dresses for the event," Lady Hendrickson announced with a nod of her head.

"But surely that won't be possible by tomorrow night," Lady Louisa said aloud.

Her aunt's eyes fell on her as if she had altogether forgotten her niece was still present in the room.

"For the picnic of course," Lady Hendrickson responded as if Lady Louisa's misunderstanding was just ridiculous. "Blue for you, of course, Elisabeth. It is a most becoming color on you," Lady Hendrickson began to list off more to herself.

"And I suppose Mary shall get one in rose, perhaps that will bring some cheer to your face. I will get one too," she looked down at her newly made black gown. "Such a shame to still have to wear such a color."

Lady Louisa was utterly shocked at her words. Surely whether there was affection in the marriage or not, to speak so disrespectfully of one's mourning was more than Lady Louisa had ever heard.

"We must plan our outfits for tomorrow's ball as well. I had not put much time into it," Miss Elisabeth said standing. "Now that there is a purpose for it, other than the enjoyment of the dance, I will need to search my belongings for a proper outfit."

It was decided that for that night any supper meals would be brought up to Lady Hendrickson's room as each girl went about finding the proper gown to wear for the event. Lady Louisa couldn't have been

more irritated at the lack of meal for the evening after such an arduous day. Not to mention the fact that she had yet to actually be invited to attend the public event with the other ladies of the house.

None the less, Lady Louisa also went upstairs following behind her aunt and cousin. She was promptly put to work hemming, pinning, and adding suggested alterations to various dresses indicated by Lady Hendrickson or Miss Elisabeth.

Lady Louisa regularly told herself that she had done such sewing many times before in the cause of charities for those less fortunate. Though it was a bit degrading to be asked a seamstress for her relations, she did the task without complaint hoping it would show to her good character and kindness of heart for them.

“Why are you not dressed?” Miss Mary said as she came into the drawing room of the small house.

Lady Louisa looked up from the book of poems she had been reading to see her young cousin dressed in a beautiful cream dress with green ivy pattern along the hems.

“Oh, Mary, you look stunning,” Lady Louisa said as her eyes looked over her cousin.

Not only was Miss Mary’s dress of the most delicate silk, but her hair was also intricately placed in beautiful cascading ringlets down her back with single pearls pinned into several decorative braids.

“One would hope so; I think Bess poked me so many times in the head I feared I might start bleeding,” Miss Mary said with a touch of her long white glove to her hair. “But you. Lady Louisa here you sit, and we must leave within the hour.”

Lady Louisa found herself utterly exhausted after yesterday’s events, then an evening full of dress altering and then a morning of sewing to complete the gowns in time. She hadn’t even considered her own outfit or even the fact that she would have the energy to attend the ball.

“I don’t think I shall attend, Mary,” Lady Louisa said delicately. “I am much too tired now.”

“Nonsense,” Miss Mary said tugging on her cousin’s hand to get her to stand. “You must come. We could introduce you to our little society

here. Plus, you did such a wonderful job on this embroider hem that my mother insisted on; I have to have you by my side. That way when I am complimented on it, I can say it was all your skilled hand's doing."

"That is very kind, but I shan't be ready in time," Lady Louisa responded.

She had to admit; however, it did feel nice to be appreciated and wanted. It seemed like the first time since her arrival. She suspected Miss Mary had many more occasions where she felt such gratitude towards her but feared speaking so in front of mother and sister.

"I shall help you. Bess will too now that she is done with me. I'm afraid Suz still has quite a bit of work to do on my sister, but she would help too if she could. You have been such a help to us all, even in just the short week you've been here. We all want to see you out tonight and having a bit of fun," Miss Mary encouraged as she led her cousin up the stairs and to Mary's own room.

For the next hour, the two girls along with the maid stayed in Miss Mary's room while Lady Louisa tried on various dresses that she had brought with her and had her hair done. The latter was particularly tricky as Lady Louisa's hair rarely cooperated.

Bess was doing her best to give Lady Louisa a unique look with various braids wrapping around her chignon and several ringlets flowing out. It didn't work out well when Lady Louisa's hair was so limp and flat to her head.

"It will be just fine, m'lady. I have found when hair is not doing as it should there is always one perfect remedy."

"And what is that Bess?" Lady Louisa asked from her seat in front of the mirror.

"A turban," Bess replied.

“Oh no, Bess,” Miss Mary chimed in from her seat on the bed. “That is far too old for her.”

“Well, I don’t mean in the actual sense as some of the ladies on in age might wear it. Instead, we will leave these bits in front, stuff some of the turban under your hair so that it looks so much fuller and nice. Then we will wrap it here...” Bess spoke as she worked.

By the time she was finished, Lady Louisa had to admit it was probably about the finest her hair had ever looked. Lady Louisa had chosen a cream dress with a rose embroidered ribbon at her waste. The fabric wrapping around her hair and highlighting each flowing curl was a matching pink color with green stripes throughout. The lines gave an even better allusion of more curls than before, and Lady Louisa could swear the pink even brought out the gold tone her hair had once had as a child.

“Mary, where are you?” Lady Hendrickson called. “You silly girl we are going to be late, and it will be all your fault,” she huffed as she entered the room.

She stopped in surprise to see Lady Louisa there and not only that but readied for the ball.

“I was just helping Louisa, Mother.”

“Oh, my dear,” she said to Lady Louisa. “I had no idea you planned on attending tonight. What with your recent traveling I expected you would want the night to rest,” she stated as she wrung her black-gloved hands.

“If it is alright with you, Lady Hendrickson, I would like to join you tonight.”

Lady Louisa suspected if she had any chance to go tonight, which she had a growing desire to after all of Bess’ hard work, she would first need to please her aunt. There was a moment of silence as Lady Hendrickson thought over the possibility of not allowing her.

There was the fact that she had no honest reason to prevent her from attending. It was purely because she didn't want her to. In terms of beauty, Lady Hendrickson was sure that her plain niece was no match for either of her daughters. There was the matter of title, however. She would not risk her two losing a chance with the Duke over a plain silly little daughter of her husband-stealing sister.

Finally, she saw no agreeable way to deter the child without it reflecting poorly on herself. It would make no difference. Her plans would still go accordingly. Perhaps if she was lucky, this ignorant city girl could get herself overwhelmed by the customs of a country public event, and decide to turn home with her tail between her legs.

Lady Hendrickson already suspected that her sudden arrival had little to do with her own husband's passing and a desperate attempt by her conniving sister to steal the Duke away from her daughters.

She was on to Lady Louisa's scheme as well as her backstabbing mother. She would show them both who would win this final battle. She formed her face back into its present smile and looked down on her deceitful niece.

"Of course," Lady Hendrickson said waving her hand off like it was a silly question to ask. "I was only thinking of you when I didn't suggest such a thing, naturally."

"That was very kind of you. I believe I will be quite up to the task though," Lady Louisa said.

Lady Hendrickson had to stop herself from saying that she highly doubted a delicate flower such as herself was ready for the high energy that accompanied country public affairs. Instead, she merely motioned for both her daughter and niece to exit the room.

The carriage ride into town was a quiet one. Lady Hendrickson and her eldest daughter had little words to exchange. Miss Mary seemed again to concentrate on the hands in her own lap and refused to make contact with anyone else in the party.

She suspected in her youthful excitement to include Lady Louisa she had somehow upset her mother. It was something that Miss Mary found she often did. Unlike her older sister who was always pleasing to their mother, Miss Mary had to struggle to find herself on the side of Lady Hendrickson's good graces.

At the same moment, Miss Elisabeth was intensely occupied with going over every possible outcome of every action to happen in the near future. This was her one and only chance to secure a rightful place among the ton. She would leave nothing to chance.

Having her cousin, Lady Louisa, there in the carriage and also on her way to the ball was of little consequence to her. In fact, she considered Lady Louisa much like one would consider a fly buzzing around. It was a slight annoyance, but nothing to really take notice of.

Lady Hendrickson was already making a mental note of all the new things she could plan for her niece to do. She had to admit, for such a simple looking town girl she did seem to have the spirit and worth ethic of a mule. She had taken her trips on foot without complaint and done all the tasks that Lady Hendrickson could come up with.

She was sure those items over the last week would have been enough to send the girl home. Instead, Lady Louisa, seemed to show the same stubborn determination of her mother. She never once complained about the tasks given no matter how demeaning.

Lady Hendrickson was quite prepared for that. In fact, she was unsure what to do without such negative remarks. Perhaps she hadn't been as hard on Lady Louisa as needed. Surely she could find things more degrading for her to do.

If that were not enough to send her crying back to her own mother, then at least Lady Hendrickson would have some much-needed servant work done for free.

Yes, she smiled at that thought as she watched the trees pass by with every rotation of the carriage wheels. She was sure to get her long-

awaited revenge on her sister.

Lady Louisa, on the other hand, settled into the pregnant silence and focused out her own window instead of the three other passengers with her. If she had been honest, she was very exhausted after such a tedious day.

In fact, she had almost fallen asleep as Bess had delicately placed each lock of hair and wrapped the fabric into place. She held her chin up high now, though. It had been clear by her aunt's actions that the lady had meant to snub her the event. And this was after all the extraordinary ways that Lady Louisa had tried to please her.

Perhaps it was purely the exhaustion talking, but she was feeling particularly vindictive as she sat and thought about her aunt. How could she have asked so much of Lady Louisa and then turn and snub her at every chance?

Certainly, it was all for the cause of ire towards the Dowager Lady Gilchrist. Lady Hendrickson seemed to have no desire to make amends with her sister. It was most puzzling since Lady Hendrickson had sent the letter stating her struggling with her husband's departure from this world.

Lady Louisa was deep in thought wondering what Lady Hendrickson could have possibly wanted from such a letter. It was apparent that help from Lady Louisa's family was not its purpose. Perhaps she had hoped that

Lady Louisa would have sent the money that Lady Hendrickson had refused in the past instead of her niece.

Before she knew it, they had reached the destination. She laughed a little to herself realizing the trip was much quicker when done in a carriage.

It was Lady Louisa's first experience at a public even in a country setting, and part of her wondered if she should have been surprised at

their stop, but after seeing the town inside and out over the week, she really found it a logical conclusion.

Instead of the usual halls that generally were attended in London, their carriage pulled up to the public barn that housed all the livestock as they came to and from town. Their own carriage was shuttled away into a stall just after the ladies exited the vehicle.

Lady Louisa wanted to ask where the event would be held. As of yet, she saw no room big enough, besides this barn, to host even such a humble town as this. She feared her question would only be returned with a scoff, however, so she walked silently behind her aunt and cousins.

They made their way around the barn. The smell of its present occupants caused the ladies all to hold handkerchiefs to their noses. Finally, on the other side, Lady Louisa saw the group making their way all in one direction.

It was a church building just behind the barn. For a moment Lady Louisa thought this gay event might be held in the holy sanctuary, but then she saw it. Just behind and to the right of the church steeple, was a large canvas tent. It reminded her of a revival tent she had once been told about. All along the front of it leading from the church to the canvas flap doors was a row of lanterns in the otherwise darkness.

Lady Louisa could barely contain her excitement at seeing it. She had never expected to attend a public dance in a tent. It seemed all so exhilarating that she forgot all her struggles of exhaustion earlier.

“Is it normal to hold events in such a way?” Lady Louisa couldn’t help but ask.

Her aunt turned on her already prepared with her response.

“I am sure it seems very insignificant to the glorious events of London. I do remember them well myself from my own childhood. If you don’t think you can handle attending such a merger event, I suggest you

begin the walk home. There was a reason after all why I didn't tell you about the ball in the first place."

"I didn't mean it that way at all, Lady Hendrickson. In fact, I am most excited to see the inside. It does look rather magical with its glowing lanterns and billowing walls. Like a dream. It could be here one moment, and in a blink, it would be gone," Lady Louisa said as her eyes looked over the spectacle.

She caught the smile on Miss Mary's lips before Lady Hendrickson huffed and moved quickly to enter, dissatisfied with Lady Louisa's reply.

When Lady Louisa entered the room, she was taken aback by several sensations all at once. First was the brightness inside the room. It seemed that every inch was lit with lanterns and tables lined with candles.

Along all the walls were chairs for participants to rest at. The main portion of the tent was opened into a dance floor with temporary wood planks for the ground. At the far front of the tent was a raised platform hosting the musicians for the night.

Though Lady Louisa was used to orchestras of various sizes, she had never seen one quite like this. It was just four gentlemen each tuning their instruments for the first set of the night. Other than the violin she had no idea what the other instruments were. One was a rather large bag with several wooden flutes sticking out from it.

Along with the sights of the hall was the mass of people. Even on market day, Lady Louisa had not seen so many people in this little village. She wondered if perhaps if this was a main event of the year drawing participants from both near and far.

The smell of all the bodies in such a close and confined area was a little offensive to the nostrils. Lady Louisa was determined not to raise her handkerchief to her nose, however. She had to guess at least three hundred bodies had crowded themselves inside the tent.

The three Hendrickson ladies walked in with chins held high, even Miss Mary. Often crowds parted and many greeted Lady Hendrickson. For her part, she mostly nodded in the direction it suited her as she waved her fan casually before her.

Lady Louisa suspected that up until the appearance of the Duke, the Hendricksons had been the closest members of society to attend this village's public events. She let her mind sit on the thought of the Duke for just a moment.

She wondered if he would, in fact, come to the event tonight. It would be understandable if he chose not to, as Lady Hendrickson suspected he would. On the other hand, there was a small piece of Lady Louisa interested to see him again, and to see him in this setting instead of the side of a road.

"Lady Hendrickson, it is always a pleasure to have you and your beautiful daughters join with us," a gray-haired man with a decorative cane said coming up to her.

Lady Hendrickson held out her lace-gloved hand for him to take. Lady Louisa did her best to hid the shock in her face that her aunt seemed to fancy herself ladyship over all present.

"Well, you know how much my girls love these type of things," she said rather bored with a wave of her fan in the direction of the three young ladies behind her.

"I believe you have an added member of your party as well. I don't believe I have had the pleasure yet," the man said hoping for an introduction.

Lady Hendrickson looked back as if she was checking to see if her niece was still there and not halfway down the road towards home.

"Yes, this is my niece. Lady Louisa Frasier, this is Mr. Drewton. He is the vicar at the church and often hosts many community events."

"It's a pleasure to meet your Mr. Drewton."

"Are you Lord and Lady Gilchrist's daughter by chance then," he said with a bright smile warming his aged face.

Lady Louisa had to do her best to keep her eyes on his own and not the large wild white whiskers protruding from either side of his cheeks.

“I am, sir.”

“I knew both your mother and father very well. Perhaps you don’t remember, but your father did, in fact, spend some time in his country seat when you and your brother were very young. They too would often join us from time to time, what with your mother having such close connections to this area.”

“How wonderful. I had no idea,” Lady Louisa replied happy to have the conversation with the man.

“Why your presence tonight is actually quite providential!”

“Why is that Mr. Drewton?” Lady Hendrickson interrupted not happy with the vicar’s words.

“Well, as I am sure you are aware the Duke of Rowland has returned from his worldly travels. Upon hearing of our humble festivities, he graciously donated the cornucopia spread over at the far table. You really must go look at it; I have never seen such a wonderful spread of meats and pies and dried fruits pies.”

“That is very kind of his grace,” Lady Hendrickson interjected again quickly before the man could continue. “I suspect it is a very kind way for his grace to send well wishes since he won’t be attending himself.”

“Oh no, Lady Hendrickson. He is to attend! I heard the news with my very own ears from his grace, himself. That is what makes your niece’s presence so perfect.”

“In what way?” Lady Hendrickson said with a snap of her fan and narrowing of her tiny eyes.

“Well, we, of course, made the Duke the honored guest of the evening.

It is only right that he opens the dancing himself. It was a sensitive subject as he would have no lady in mind to open the dance with. I feared to ask one lady over the other here as it might cause contentious feelings,” he said waving his cane to the crowd.

“But with Lady Louisa in our presence, it would only be right that she too opens the festivities at his side.”

Lady Louisa was just as startled at the announcement as her aunt no doubt was. Lady Louisa did understand the vicar's natural progression into that train of thought. At the same time, she feared what resulting thought it conjured in her aunt and Miss Elisabeth's mind.

“How interesting for you to suggest such a thing,” Lady Hendrickson said after a beat. “I am afraid my niece is very shy, however. I don't think she would take to being paraded around before all here,” she added with a little chuckle.

Lady Louisa was quiet by nature, and certainly not confrontational. She would never go against her aunt's words, though they are untrue, in front of another. In fact, most of her life she was healing problems not the cause of them. She was rather fine giving up the dance to salve any enmity.

“Nonsense. The matter is settled. I will go and find the Duke and inform him now,” the old man said before turning and leaving the group.

“That ridiculous old man,” Lady Hendrickson breathed under her breath. “He thinks that just because he is a man he must have the final say in every situation. The impertinence.”

She then turned to her two daughters. Miss Mary had been waiting quietly at her side. Miss Elisabeth, on the other hand, had found a friend of her own that she was conversing with. That had stopped at the announcement of the Duke's presence.

“What shall we do now, Mother?” She asked with a bit of a squeak in

her voice.

Of all the situations she had planned for on their trip into town, the presence of the Duke was not one of them.

“To start, my dear, you may calm down. Certainly making a scene will not help in the least. Let us take a turn around the room and see who else is present tonight. It may work considerably to our advantage to have the Duke here after all,” Lady Hendrickson said in a calm demanding tone.

However, before they began their turn around the room, they were overtaken by Colonel Jasper. As soon as the man saw the small gathering of ladies he knew well enough, he made a line straight to them.

“Good evening, Colonel Jasper,” Miss Elisabeth said with a flutter of her dark eyelashes.

Lady Louisa wondered if she was perhaps not capable of deterring from the plan she had made for herself. A quick glance over at her younger sister sent disappointment through her frame. Miss Mary looked rather pitiful.

“All you ladies look magnificent tonight. If one didn’t know better I would think I was standing with the queen herself,” he said with a charming smile.

“Yes, my daughters do have a very sophisticated air around them,” Lady Hendrickson proceeded. “I am often told that they could easily be mistaken for a Countess or say, Duchess.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the Colonel said with a polite smile.

“I, myself, consider such a thing not just breeding. I believe parentage alone is not sufficient to create a proper lady, but the right education as well,” Lady Hendrickson continued.

“Well, then it should be no surprise to you why I have come to seek you ladies out,” Colonel Jasper replied trying to hide understanding of her meaning.

“And what is that Colonel?” Miss Elisabeth asked with a flash of her own sweet smile.

“Well, Mr. Dewton just came to inform me that Lady Louisa and Rowland will introduce the first set. I was rather hoping to place my name on some dance cards as well before all the sets were scooped up,” he answered.

Though Colonel Jasper did not speak of a specific lady from the group, his eyes falling directly on Miss Mary told a different story. Lady Hendrickson’s mouth broke into a gallant smile.

“Do you mean to fill Lady Louisa’s card. How very thoughtful of you. How very interesting that you felt the need to come here straight away,” Lady Hendrickson announced.

Clearly, she thought that the Colonel had set his eyes on Lady Louisa. Perhaps she thought it a proper match, and at the very least, a way to keep Lady Louisa from distracting the Duke any more than would already be done by their first dance.

The Colonel not wanting to seem rude didn’t correct her of the mistake though disappointment could be felt from three of the parties of five.

“I am not sure if I will have the energy to dance two sets in a row. Perhaps you would allow me to defer your invitation until the third or fourth set? I do hate to disappoint you so, however. Perhaps if my cousin, Mary, would be willing she could take the place of the second set in my stead,” Lady Louisa said smoothly.

Both the Colonel and Miss Mary exchanged a quick look. Mary was overcome with happiness and embarrassment all at the same time.

“I would be happy to step in, if it would suit you,” Miss Mary replied barely above a whisper.

“I would like that very much,” Colonel Jasper said with a bow before excusing himself from the group.

“Well, it looks like our cousin has an admirer,” Miss Elisabeth said in teasing fashion after the Colonel left. “He was just begging to get his chance to dance with you. A little poetically too if you ask me,” she added with a snuff.

Lady Louisa was simultaneously confused as to how her elder cousin could change so easily from false flattery to utter despise in the matter of moments, as well as the fact that both she and Lady Hendrickson seemed utterly unaware how much Mary and the Colonel seemed to have eyes for one another.

“Ladies and Gentleman,” Mr. Drewton called from his raised position on the platform. “I would like to officially welcome out our distinguished guest, his grace the Duke of Rowland, as well as his party including his Uncle, Mr. James Vaughan, and his grace’s very good friend Colonel Huge Jasper. We are so honored to have you in our midst this night as well as your generous donation,” he added with a wave to the food table.

A loud applaud erupted around the room. Lady Louisa was finding that this type of public event was vastly more energized then she was used to.

“Now that we have all sufficiently visited and had our fill, I believe it is time to strike up the band,” Mr.

Drewton said amid more cheers from the crowded room. “Now,” he continued. “Naturally we wish our most esteemed guest, his grace the Duke of Rowland, to open the dance floor for us. I am happy to announce that joining him on the floor will be the lovely Lady Louisa Fraiser.”

All eyes looked around the room for the lady mentioned. Lady Louis rather felt like hiding underneath the buffet of food. The Duke, ever the efficient man in his duties, stepped out onto the dance floor.

His eyes scanned the room for just a moment before they fell on Lady Louisa. She couldn’t help but feel the flutter of excitement as his face relaxed into a smile. In just three steps he seemed to cross the whole of the dance floor and stood before her with an outstretched hand.

Rather reluctantly Lady Louisa took it. It was hard to distinguish the surge of emotions floating in the air right at that moment. For her, it was an embarrassment and a new tingling sensation in her stomach she had never yet experienced. For the ladies next to her, and Lady Louisa dare thought, the rest of the room, it was indignation and jealousy.

She took his hand despite the silent prayers around the room that she wouldn't, and allowed him to lead her to the center of the room. It was probably the first time in her life she found herself in such a place, with so many eyes on her.

"I do apologize for ringing you into this hoop," the duke said softly for only Lady Louisa's ears. "Had I considered the reaction my presence caused, I would have been more adamant in my absence."

Both parties readied themselves for the first set, and the band struck up the music. For the most part, it wasn't much different than the sets that Lady Louisa had danced back home. Ordinarily, first dances were lively music, and she was sure the present song playing was of the fastest she had ever heard.

For the Duke's part, he held his head up high and smiled graciously to all around him. Lady Louisa was a little shocked by how different his whole countenance seemed to be in this setting. Even his smile didn't seem to match the few she had seen in their last two meetings. Instead, it seemed to be painted into place and without much feeling.

Finally, others were invited to join in on the jig dance and happily did so. Lady Louisa did notice that Miss Elisabeth had already secured a partner for this first dance and managed to find a way right next to the Duke and herself.

"You don't look as if you are enjoying this much," Lady Louisa said after the dance settled back into the rhythm of the steps with the now crowded floor.

"Why would you think such a thing, I am very much enjoying myself,"

he responded though he never seemed to look directly at Lady Louisa.

Instead, his eyes seemed to move over the crowd, and his speech was very diplomatic. She studied the man before her as if she had seen him for the first time.

He stood the height and dressed the look of a Duke in his elegant black jacket and perfect cream knot. His black hair was slicked back perfectly and tied with a ribbon. Whereas before his eyes could have pierced to the very core of her on the road they seemed now to be milked over with a shade of facade.

“What swayed you to come tonight?” Lady Louisa asked.

“My uncle,” the Duke replied honestly. He gave a smile of relief and for the first time since they started the dance let his eyes drift over his partner. “I am afraid he is most insistent that I begin my search for a match

tonight. Even gave me a long list of dance cards to put my name on.”

“So you are here to appease your uncle?”

“In a way yes. In another, I suppose I do need to begin my search for a companion. A dance is a choice place to start.”

“You have already won so many over with your donation. I suspect no girl will deny you her card this night.”

He looked away shyly. Lady Louisa was unsure if it was embarrassment or shame though.

“It was just one of those things expected of me. You know how it is, you must behave in a particular way when in public.”

“I suppose to an extent that is true,” Lady Louisa agreed.

“However, is it not also important to be yourself when looking for a

life companion. I may have only had short meetings with you in the past, but I fear that the man before me is not the one I chanced to run into before.”

“Well, of course not,” he rather blurted out. “I can’t be. A Duke has certain expectations put on him. I cannot be myself.”

“I understand the necessities of polite society,” Lady Louisa urged, “but certainly you can’t say that you feel the need to so alter your person. Certainly, that is no way to find a wife. How would she know the man she is intended to marry?”

“I am pretty sure it is the only way. No lady wants the true man. They want the title, status, and they expect the man attached is their ideal Duke. You must do the same though. Certainly, you find yourself acting vastly different between casual and public settings?”

“Not at all, I must confess, Your Grace. I don’t know if I would like myself much if I was ashamed to show it in public,” Lady Louisa said in honesty.

She supposed the Duke must have taken her words as a slight since his eyes seemed to narrow down on her. She, in fact, was just speaking the truth of her nature. She was a plain shy girl and no matter her circumstance she had long since learned that hiding her person was not a worthy cause.

“I would have excepted someone of your sex to understand my meaning, but perhaps not. Is it not true that a woman’s whole existence involves putting on a different face than the one God gave? For certainly that must be what the hours of embellishing is for. Not to mention the accurate uses of coy language all in the hopes to ensnaring one’s goal.”

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I no more speak coyly than I do embellish. Perhaps you have a wrong idea of the female sex, or are in the market for a lesser breed.”

“Do you think so highly of yourself then? Too good for the tactics used for hundreds of years by your foremothers?” He shot back.

“I neither think highly of myself, Your Grace, nor do I lower my standards to that of superficial and the lies of allusion.”

The song was finally coming to an end. She was very disappointed to learn the true character of the Duke. At this moment he seemed no better than Miss Elisabeth. Clearly, he was just as manipulative and deceitful to show a mask before the whole in order to trick a lady to his end goal.

“I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors, Your Grace, but I fear this is where we must part ways. I don’t think I would be much help to a gentleman who insists on presenting a lie.”

The Duke’s mouth opened in shock at her accusation.

His eyes grew cold and hard as he looked down at her.

“I believe that must be for the best. I dare say I could not find company in someone so critical.”

“Honesty may be critical, but it is still that, honest,” she shot back with more vigor than she normally had.

He was truly irritating to her. How he could live such a duplicitous life with one seeming so deceitful and the other so enjoyable was unimaginable to her. Perhaps it was the folly of a handsome member of the ton to feel the need to be so conniving. It indeed was the case for Miss Elisabeth.

For the first time in her life, Lady Louisa saw her plain, humble features a blessing in her life. It may have caused her years of torment in her youth. It may have robbed her of any chance of making a match herself. But at the very least, it pushed her through the fire and brimstone of life. She had been molded into a better lady for it, known who she was, who she was not, and no need to pretend for the sake of

others.

The Duke of Rowland was utterly thrown by the woman before him. She seemed so hypocritical in his eyes. Being a lady of society in itself proved that she behaved just as he was this night. In fact, it was how any human being acted.

Certainly, every person in the world catered their attitude to fit the company they were presented with. She, however, had gone even lower than that. She had lied about her identity altogether when they first met.

That would certainly warrant more vicious words than his behavior.

At the beginning of the dance, he had been encircled with such high admiration for Lady Louisa. Now he was seeing her in a new light. She was just as pompous as all the other ladies he was required to choose from.

As the dance finished, he bid her a final good evening without so much as a soft glance, and she scarcely did the same before he deposited her back at her aunt's side. He suspected that Lady Hendrickson was eager for him to stay and chat with her a while and in truth, he probably should have for politeness sake.

He was in rather a cross mood. He had a feeling it had less to do with his anger kindled against the lady than his pride wounded. She had pointed out a fact that had already been an irritant to him.

He despised the mask he was required to parade around in. It was one of the single most reasons why he had stayed away from England for so long. Naturally, they had first left in his early boyhood so that he could gain some experiences of the world.

In his young age, however, he had already experienced much of the duplicitous nature of those around him. They seemed only to say the things he wanted to hear. It was infuriating that he couldn't possibly trust anyone outside his uncle, or his close friend Jasper, for the truth.

Perhaps it was just the fact that it was a lady that had spoken words that he was not expecting in a place such as this, or perhaps it was because it was a woman he could not quite understand completely. He knew deep down that her words were the truth, however, and ones he would have spoken himself had he seen it in another.

None the less the hurt pride was too much to forgive this night. He didn't stay to speak with Lady Louisa or her aunt, but instead excused himself promptly.

Lady Louisa was right to the fact that he would not be short partners this night. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure he had ever been pressed upon to dance by so many matrons with single daughters ever before.

With each false smile a lady flashed at him or shallow conversation, he only saw the reflection of his own shallowness. It was very off-putting and made it very difficult for him to seem to at least enjoy himself.

"Something is bothering you, Rowland," his uncle said from his side as the Duke took a moment to refresh himself with some punch.

The room had seemed to squeeze even more people in though it scarcely seemed possible at the beginning of the dance. The continuous dancing mingling with the warmth of bodies was starting to turn the tent into a hothouse.

"Nothing at all Uncle," Rowland lied.

"Well, I do hope you are better at convincing ladies of love than that."

"Why try to convince someone else of what one doesn't feel. Would it not be better to give up this whole charade and wait for the real thing to come along."

"My dear nephew, please take the advice of an old man. All love is, is a charade."

"Even my own parents?" Rowland asked with a raised brow.

He spent his whole childhood begging his uncle to give any detail about his parents since their death. Being a boy of such a young age, he had so few of his own memories of them. His uncle had painted a picture of good and honorable people that cared for each other.

“You are not a boy any longer,” his uncle said with a bit of hesitation. “They were good people your mother and your father. Their marriage, however, was not one of choice but an obligation. They made the best of it as most do.”

“I had no idea,” the Duke said before settling into his own thoughts this brought about.

“I am sure they found joy in each other, however. If they could have lived longer, I am sure other siblings would have come about as well.”

Rowland rolled his eyes. Why is it that affection and intimacy always were one in the same. In James Vaughan’s mind, the only type of love was the physical kind. It was also why he had never found a permanent companion of his own.

Relationships based solely on physicality were never destined to go very far at all. His uncle had settled into this mentality of shallow quick romances in any country they might be. That was partly the reason why it came as such a shock that his uncle suggested and strongly insisted on their current venture.

Rowland had fancied the two of them living the rest of their days much how they had the first twenty-six years of his life. It had been fun, energetic, care-free, and without the added weight of a spouse giving her opinion on matters.

Though Rowland didn’t see relationships in the same light as his uncle, he also didn’t see the necessity of finding one. Perhaps there was a chance for actual love out there for him, but why waste his time looking for it when there was so much more he could be doing.

The night finally ended and, other than the blip with Lady Louisa, it

went without any defect. He made the acquaintance of several young ladies all amply ready to be married. He was preferably in the hope that some sort of arrangement might be made with one of them perhaps.

Choosing a bride out of country ladies and untitled gentleman's daughters meant they would be more willing to go along with any arrangement he set all for the sake of his title. It wasn't like he had a terrible idea in mind.

After all, if his uncle was going to force his hand in marriage, it would make sense to do so in a way most convenient to him.

If he could find an agreeable lady to wed, she would stay at Bassen Park and he would be free to travel as he pleased like before. Naturally, the time would come first to produce an heir. Once that was taken care of, however, he would return to his old life. She would stay and take care of the heir.

It was a win for both of them. It would mean little change in his own ways, except for the years necessary to produce an heir, and she would get the fortune and prestige that she was searching for.

He had hope that the Lady Louisa would have been a willing friend in his search. She would have been a necessary companion in the task to help him weed out the women most willing to take him up on his offer. Apparently, she would no longer be a part of the equation.

He thought of her again at his morning meal the following day. She was such a vexing conundrum to him. Though she was no great beauty in looks like her cousins, she still had her own pleasant look about her that he rather enjoyed. She seemed so simple and straightforward.

But then there was that other confusing side of her. First, she chose to lie at their first meeting. Rowland had assumed it was purely over embarrassment. After all, he had assumed her to be of a lower class. In a way, Rowland supposed that whole situation had been a making of

his own actions.

But then there was that irritating conversation they had the night before at the public dance. She had seemed so cross with his manners. How else did she expect him to behave in such a setting? He had a name and title to think of and represent in a way that would bring respect to his predecessors.

“Lost in thought over there, old chap?” a voice aroused Rowland from his thinking.

He looked over to see his companion at the breakfast table looking at him with a raised brow of interest.

“Perhaps it was a lady from last night that has finally caught your attention?” Colonel Jasper suggested.

“Well, she certainly caught my attention, but not in the way you were thinking.”

“And who would that be. Let me guess. The very Lovely Miss Elisabeth. I know Lady Hendrickson is very set on you finding your way to her eldest daughter.

“No, actually I was thinking of Lady Louisa. She said some cross words to me last night while dancing.”

“Cross? Really? Now I’ve only spent a couple of afternoons and conversations with her, but I never quite pictured her the cross type.”

Rowland looked over at his friend surprised by his words. Jasper was much older than him, perhaps by eight years. They had only shared a few years in school at the same time, but they had grown quick friends over it. Like himself, Jasper had never married. It wasn’t for lack of desire but lack of opportunity and the ability to support a wife.

Rowland had been happy to sponsor his friend's commission as an officer. Even still the early years as a militiaman didn’t offer much by

way of wages. On top of that, it was a job with considerable travel. These were both in opposition to finding his own happiness.

“She said I was putting on a very Lord like show in much more words than that.”

“Well, were you not?”

“Of course I was. I’m supposed to be. It is what is expected of me. It comes with the title.”

“Perhaps she didn’t mean it in an insulting way; you only took it so,” he suggested.

“You seem to be defending her very determinately,” Rowland retorted. “Your Lady Louisa claimed that I was behaving in a way as to hide my true personality all in hopes to trick one of her female companions into finding me agreeable.”

“Well, were you?” Jasper cut to the quick.

“Of course not, I mean not really. I mean, you know how it is,” Rowland said with irritating gestures of my hands. “I do have to behave a certain way in public, that is just the way things are. I have certain expectations put on me. Of course, I also would want to put my best foot forward when meeting several ladies that could have potential. I’m not going to flaunt my worst traits in such a situation.”

“Like how you pick at your cuticles or your atrocious handwriting,” Jasper teased.

Rowland rolled his eyes.

“I’m just saying, I might have been putting my best foot forward, but she accused me of altering myself altogether to deceive and create an allusion of lies,” he added quoting her words exaggeratedly. “Perhaps you were,” Jasper retorted with a shrug.

“Now I know for certain you are on her side.”

“My dear friend, when it comes between you and a pleasant Lady I will always choose the latter. Besides,” he said with a laugh, “the Henry Vaughan I knew from days past would have never even tried to put on a mask before ladies. In fact, he would have made fun of those who did so in his presence.”

“Yes, well that Henry Vaughan was a kid and not the Duke of Rowland. Now I must play the game as good as any other. I need to get the wife and the heir so that I can go back to my own life. The sooner it gets done the better.”

“My dear friend,” Jasper said setting aside his plate of boiled eggs and toast. “If you actually think you can go back to your old life you are sadly mistaken. What I wouldn’t give to be in your shoes. I would happily find a woman to love and spend my days with her.”

“You apparently already have in Lady Louisa,” Rowland responded in a teasing fashion.

“Actually, I might already have in another form. I rather hoped you would help me with that, old chap.”

“Happy to help,” Rowland said interested to hear the name of his friend's interest.

“As we said Lady Hendrickson is most interested in you marrying her daughter Miss Elisabeth.”

Rowland thought on Miss Elisabeth. He had danced with her last night and made pleasant conversation. She was very lovely to look on and seemed to know all the right things to say. She rather did remind him of those shallow misses that his uncle enjoyed company with. There was nothing beyond the surface with that kind.

“And you wish to marry her in my stead I hope?”

“Unfortunately not, but I have found great interest in Miss Mary. She was charming to talk with, and I spent much of last night in her company if you didn’t notice.”

Rowland had noticed that now that he thought back on the night.

“I wonder if you could use your influence over the Lady Hendrickson and invited them here an evening? It would be a great opportunity to get to know Miss Mary better.”

“I doubt it would be hard to arrange. In fact, if I but said the words I would expect to find all four of the ladies right here on my doorstep,” Rowland said with a satisfying smile at his wit.

"As much as I wish to help you, my friend, I don't know if I could stand another night with Lady Louisa and still be civil," Rowland added.

“I really think you might have judged Lady Louisa a bit harshly. And if she really felt so poorly about you, I doubt she would come at all,” Jasper added as an afterthought.

“I suppose I could hope for that.”

“Yes, you might have to. I suspect we will be seeing a lot of them over the coming months, at least I hope to. I would guess Miss Elisabeth hopes the same.”

The addition of her name again in the conversation made Rowland think critically on the miss. It would be a reasonable choice for him, and an easy one at that. He was sure with Lady Hendrickson at the lead of her daughter’s husband search; she would move things along at a fast pace.

Though he found Lady Hendrickson's behavior very irritating, Rowland tried not to think too harshly of the lady. He had been told that she mourned over the death of her husband recently. Certainly, a woman alone with two daughters would feel a sharper pang to see

them settled right.

She had the use of close relations to help her though.

Why else would Lady Louisa be in present company? No lady would choose to leave London during the height of the season unless it was to aid a relation that they had great affection for.

“Well, I am sure I have little say in the matter. I suppose I will be putting my poor handwriting to work today to invite the ladies over for a dinner party at their earliest convenience.”

“That’s very good of you, old chap,” Jasper said with a smile split across his face.

“You know, Miss Mary is at least ten years your junior if not more.”

“I would guess closer to fifteen actually. I don’t think age matters much when you find the right one.”

“And she is your right one? You are certain of this already?”

“Not certain, no. But I intend to find out.”

“Mother! Mother come quickly!” Miss Elisabeth called down the hall.

Lady Hendrickson left the comfort of the drawing room to see what her daughter was going on about.

“It is from the Duke,” was all Miss Elisabeth said before handing over the letter.

“Mary!” Lady Hendrickson shouted after her eyes ran over the parchment. “Mary, come in this instant,” she called again to the back of the house.

Miss Mary and Lady Louisa were outside tending to the garden when the shouts came. Luckily the house was small enough that any voice shouted could be heard.

Miss Mary, upon hearing her mother’s call got up instantly and brushed off her gloved hands.

Lady Louisa followed closely behind her wondering what the excitement could possibly be about. She was rather reluctant to leave the small sprouts of plants just barely beginning to show their heads above the soil.

“It is a letter from the Duke,” Lady Hendrickson announced to the whole group once seated in the drawing room and tea called. “He has invited the household over to an intimate dinner at Bassen Park.”

“How wonderful,” Lady Louisa said while Miss Elisabeth was bouncing in her seat with excitement having already read the news herself.

She turned to Lady Louisa as if remember her presence.

“Oh, and there was this letter for you too,” she said handing over the parchment.

Miss Elisabeth secretly hoped it was of so much importance that Lady Louisa would excuse herself from the room. Instead, she opened and read it right there announcing she didn't recognize the hand it was written in.

My Dear Friend Lady Louisa,

I am sure that along with this letter your household has also received an invitation from the Duke of Rowland for a dinner party. Rowland expressed to me that your last meeting was less than favorable and for that reason, you might hesitate to attend.

I am writing you to implore you to join our event and give Rowland another chance. He is a very admirable gentleman once you get to know him well.

I greatly enjoy your company and want to assure you that you are a welcome guest at Bassen Park. Please do join us for our evening of society and enjoyment.

Your Friend,

Colonel Huge Jasper

“Well, what is it?” Lady Hendrickson said when Lady Louisa read the letter a second time and still didn't speak. “It is very rude to read correspondence in front of others and not speak on it,” she added fluttering her own letter.

Lady Louisa went rather pink in the cheek. She wasn't exactly sure what to tell her aunt. She very well couldn't say that she had chastened the Duke at the public dance and Colonel Jasper was only encouraging her to come to the dinner despite that event.

Her aunt would be furious to know that Lady Louisa

did anything that might offend the Duke. She would be sure it would hurt Miss Elisabeth's chances. The proof of the letter, however, relieved Lady Louisa of that fact. One that she herself had wondered these past few days.

"Well, it is just a small note from Colonel Jasper," Lady Louisa answered finally in a soft voice.

"From the Colonel? Is it about the dinner? Well, what does it say? Why on earth would he write you?" Lady Hendrickson seemed to spew questions out without control.

"I believe he wanted to ensure that I would also be attending the dinner."

"Why ever would he do that," Miss Elisabeth said then her honey eyes light up like a candle. "Why Lady Louisa I believe you have a true admirer. I promise I won't be cross that you have stolen him away from me," she continued in a playful manner.

Lady Louisa wanted to say that Colonel Jasper had as much interest in her as he did in Miss Elisabeth, which was exactly none. She also wanted to tell her wretched cousin that it was awful prideful to think after just a few interactions where she shamefully flirted with the man that he would have fallen deeply in love with Miss Elisabeth.

In fact, Lady Louisa would have rather liked to tell Miss Elisabeth that if she had any eyes at all, she would see that the only growing affection for the Colonel was from her own sister Miss Mary.

Lady Louisa looked over at Miss Mary at that moment. Again she held her hands tight to her apron and her gaze held fast to her hand. Lady Louisa rather suspected she was hoping not to give any of her thoughts away. Assuredly, living in this family with these female companions it would not be safe for Miss Mary to announce her own feelings to them.

"I am sure it is only because the letter was addressed to the Hendrickson family and I am not of that family. I am sure it was a kind afterthought to clear up any miscommunication."

"Then why are you blushing?" Lady Hendrickson asked with a raise of her brow and purse of her lips.

"I do believe you have a small crush on the Colonel," she finally concluded.

"Yuck," Miss Elisabeth said with a shiver. "He must be at least fifty years old."

Apparently, it was assumed that he would have interest in Miss Elisabeth but not that she should ever have interest in him. Lady Louisa suspected that she was undeserving of even his friendship so shallow were her thoughts.

"Hardly, my dear," her mother said waving her off. "I suspect he could not be more than thirty and five. That is about your age is it not Lady Louisa," Lady Hendrickson said with a narrowing of her cat eyes.

It was meant to be a slight, Lady Louisa was sure of it. For no woman thirty and five years without a husband would surely own up to such an age.

"Actually, I am only twenty and six, Aunt Sarah," Lady

Louisa retorted. "I scarcely say a year older than you Elisabeth. Isn't that right?" Lady Louisa added turning her head to her offending cousin.

"I suppose that is true," Miss Elisabeth said brushing at her petticoats.

"Oh, dear, I didn't mean offense," Lady Hendrickson said with a laugh though she clearly did. "I only meant that this might be a very promising match for you. Surely you must come, for it would be a wonderful opportunity."

“I don’t know if I like that idea,” Miss Elisabeth chimed in not liking her mother inviting what Miss Elisabeth thought of as her biggest competitor for the Duke’s heart right into his home.

“No, it will be perfect,” Lady Hendrickson said in a manner that meant the matter was settled. “She can help influence the Colonel our way. In turn, the Colonel will have a chance to influence the Duke. This will work vastly better than our previous plan that was muddled by the Duke’s appearance at the public dance.”

Lady Louisa was astonished at her aunt’s manipulative ways. Even something that might have been little consequence to her was formed and shaped into any way of preserving her daughter’s claim on the Duke.

“Of course you would be more than happy to speak to the Colonel about Elisabeth, wouldn’t you dear?” Lady Hendrickson said down her nose at Lady Louisa.

She took a steadying breath before answering. Never in her life had she felt such a strong desire to take on the personality of her best friend, Isabella, and speak at that moment exactly what she was thinking.

Instead, Lady Louisa remembered her promise to her own mother, practically chanted it in her head before answering.

“I would be more than happy to,” Lady Louisa said with a steady tone as best she could.

The dinner party was set for four days’ time. Miss

Elisabeth spoke incessantly for the next three days on why it was made for so far in the future. The logical reason would be first to give the ladies time to respond and then the hosting party time to organize.

Miss Elisabeth would hear none of this. She was completely convinced the real reason of the matter was because the Duke would be having

serval similar parties with other families in the county to find his best fit.

It was deeply offensive and troubling to her that the Hendrickson invitation was so far in the future. How could he possibly have other ladies to see of more importance than she?

Every day for the next several all conversation circuited around this fact with Miss Elisabeth's mother doing her best to assure that, as best as her knowledge, no other families had attended to Bassen Park.

Lady Louisa often wondered if Lady Hendrickson sent one of the servants to watch the street. Now that Lady Louisa knew that Mentheith house was one of only a few houses that led down the road with Bassen Park at the end of the lane.

Lady Louisa would not have put it passed her aunt to do such a thing. With each daily and sometimes hourly report that still no other carriage had yet passed by their house on the way to Bassen, Lady Louisa was almost sure that a sentry was posted at the head of Mentheith's private lane at all hours, day and night.

"I went to visit with the Jensen sisters yesterday, and Dorcas would not stop her incessant chatting over the public dance," Miss Elisabeth said over dinner on the night before their invite to dine with the Duke.

"She claims the Duke danced with her twice. I assured her that I was the only one that he danced with twice. I am sure if propriety had allowed it, he would have danced with me a third time."

"How preposterous for her to claim such a thing," Lady Hendrickson agreed.

Lady Louisa did her best not to roll her eyes as she dug yet another article of clothing from the darning basket at her feet. She looked over at Miss Mary to her right. Miss Mary, like Lady Louisa, was of little words. Lady Louisa didn't mind the silence from her younger cousin, but would have rather it be filled with anything but more discussion

from her aunt and eldest cousin.

“I assured her as politely as I could that it wasn’t possible as I already knew every lady he danced with that night and that I was the only one he danced with twice,” Miss Elisabeth said lifting her head in the air. “Well, what did she say to that,” Lady Hendrickson encouraged much to Lady Louisa’s disappointment.

“She had the nerve to pull out her dance card and show me the Duke’s name on it twice.”

“I can’t believe it,” Lady Hendrickson said with an audible shock. “Do you believe it to be valid?”

“Absolutely not! The second signature was the last dance of the night. I can scarcely say it resembled the first, which I can confirm the Duke of Rowland did dance with her. She had the nerve to put his name on the last dance,” Miss Elisabeth ended with a laugh.

Lady Hendrickson joined in with her daughter's merriment.

“What a wretched thing,” Lady Hendrickson added when they both had regained composure.

“I bet she sat all alone for that last dance and was too ashamed to admit such a thing, so she forged a name in its empty place,” Miss Elisabeth suggested.

“It is sad really,” Lady Hendrickson said as she opened her fan and began to cool herself after such an episode of joy. “Some people will lower themselves to such shameful things all in the name of securing something they had no right going after in the first place.”

Lady Louisa laid down her work at the words spoken by her aunt. Her mouth audibly dropped open. She checked herself quickly however and only exchanged glances with Miss Mary for a small second. She could see in her young cousin’s eyes that she had thought the exact same thing at the exact same moment.

They each smiled wryly at each other. Both feeling a little guilty for thinking such an unchristian like thought about Lady Hendrickson, and then satisfaction in at least knowing that they were not the only one that thought so.

For surely if at least two or more people draw the same conclusion on a person's character isn't it more likely to be true?

All three Hendrickson ladies were dressed in their finest as they left the carriage in front of Bassen Park. Lady Louisa, who had taken the time to dress in her lemon colored silk dinner gown, couldn't believe the sight of the estate upon exiting the carriage.

She had only seen one other great house to her knowledge, and that was Wintercrest Manor. Bassen Park seemed to rival it in grandeur. She supposed that was the look of most estates outside of London and wondered for a moment on her brother's own country seat not too far away from her current residence had the same majesty.

They were welcomed up the stone steps by a waiting footman who opened the door for them upon entering. Waiting just inside the hallway was another footman to show them to the hosting party in the library.

Lady Louisa watched each shut door they passed by as they made their way deeper inside the estate house. She was amazed by the number of rooms and bustling people all about.

She wondered what each oaken door held behind its thick barrier. Perhaps some were fine drawing rooms or offices. Others might have been massive dance halls like the one she was shown by Isabella at Wintercrest Manor. Though she had a hard time imagining anything as wondrous a spectacle as Wintercrest's dance hall.

Each lady was announced in order, much to Lady Hendrickson's displeasure, before they entered the room. Inside they found a warmly lit vast space full of books and various arranged sitting area. Though there was not much chill in the night air, a fire glowed in the large

fireplace for comfort.

As each lady entered all three gentlemen stood to greet them. Lady Louisa only stole a look of the Duke for a second before promising herself not to look again. The effect of his dress had already done its damage, however.

The Duke of Rowland was meticulously dressed in a navy coat with cream undershirt and tan pantaloons with high black boots. His black hair seemed to reflect the firelight like ebony glass and his eyes seemed all the fiercer green as he bowed respectfully to the welcomed ladies.

His eyes only met Lady Louisa's for just a second, but he couldn't help but hold his gaze on her long after she looked away from him. She looked rather breathtaking in her soft color dress that shined in the light. Next, to her simple beauty, her aunt and cousin seemed well overdone in their elaborate frocks and frills.

He remained himself, with a clearing of his throat, that he was not to speak to this lady again. In fact, he was supposed to be disappointed to see her at all after their last exchange.

For some reason, however, in the time they had spent apart since the public ball and this night, he had entirely forgotten why her words had seemed so offensive to him. He decided that if she were to speak to him this night not only would he be cordial as he was raised to be, but also be willing to brush away old opinions and start anew.

With that sentiment, he invited the whole party of ladies to join them on some sofas for some light refreshments before dinner was served.

"I have set up a table for a nice game of cards if anyone should wish to join," Colonel Jasper said after all parties were comfortable and settled into the room.

"I am quite sure that Lady Louisa would be happy to," Lady Hendrickson said. "She does love a good game of cards, don't you

dear?"

Lady Louisa looked at her aunt with a bit of surprise. Not once had she entered into a game of cards at her aunt's house. Though she was in no way averse to the game, she was however irritated that the purpose of her aunt's words was only to tease her for the ill-formed opinion that Lady Hendrickson had of the Colonel's affection for her.

"I would be more than happy to join you," Lady Louisa said with a smile at the Colonel.

He was a very kind man, and she did enjoy being in his company. It would be a pleasant diversion for her and at least kept her from having to converse with the Duke.

"Perhaps Miss Mary could join us as well?" Lady Louisa asked turning to her youngest cousin.

Lady Louisa was quite sure that Miss Mary would not have volunteered to do so on her own. At the same time, it was easy to see that she had a growing affection for the Colonel and was rather hoping for the chance to spend time with him.

"A splendid suggestion," the Colonel said approving the idea as he looked over at Miss Mary.

She blushed shyly as their eyes met and in that instant Lady Louisa was sure that the growing feelings were a mutual occurrence.

Rowland looked over at the tabled trio as they quietly moved cards around on the table with occasional giggles and conversation. He was happy to see his friend in such high spirits as he enjoyed the game with Miss Mary.

He had wondered at Lady Hendrickson's instant suggestion that Lady Louisa joined Jasper when it seemed so clear to him that both Jasper and the younger Hendrickson daughter had eyes on each other.

He turned back to his own party. Currently, his uncle was deep in conversation with the two ladies discussing the vast property and various amenities that it held. He rather felt like a horse for sale at that moment, as his uncle outlined all the highlighting benefits of his purchase. He wondered if soon he would be made to bare his teeth for Miss Hendrickson's inspection.

"Would you say that you have found your return to England very pleasing then, Mr. Vaughan?" Lady Hendrickson said to keep the conversation going.

"It is always good to return home," Mr. Vaughan said though Rowland knew it to be a blatant lie. "I do miss the entertaining distractions of foreign lands, however. I haven't found the same excitement as we had there."

"Please do tell us a tale of some of your adventures then. I do find the idea of traveling to far off lands rather thrilling," Lady Hendrickson countered with a lie of her own.

As Rowland's uncle wove a tale of elephant rides and exotic dancing Rowland's eyes went back to the card table. He wondered if perhaps he could excuse himself and join them. The trio seemed to be enjoying themselves far more than he was.

"I dare say we have just as many wonderful distractions here in England. Especially for you, Your Grace, who has spent such little time in your homeland," Lady Hendrickson said encouraging him into their conversation.

"Really, Lady Hendrickson?" Rowland turned and answered obediently. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to give me some pointers on the matter. As you said, I left the country just after my schooling and know so little of the land."

"Well, there is the hunts to start. I know fine gentleman find that very exciting and distracting. Of course, there is also London during the season. It might be a wonderful event for you to attend next year.

Though I do find it more exciting when one has a partner to share it with,” she added with a curled smile to insinuate her daughter.

“My own Elisabeth was sent to London for improvements in her skills from masters, and found it most pleasing, didn’t you dear?” she added to create a conversation between the Duke and her daughter.

“Quite so,” Miss Hendrickson said without skip of a beat. “The musicals and plays during the season are wonderful to watch, Your Grace. You really must try to see a few before returning to your adventure.”

“I suspect it will be some time before the Duke returns to adventuring, if at all,” Mr. Vaughan interjected.

“Yes,” the Duke agreed though his heart was not in it. “I rather feel an extended break would suit me fine. I have found the country very diverting thus far and enjoy the idea of spending many more years getting to know my homeland.”

“Many find an open-air carriage ride around the town a wonderful opportunity to get to know the land better. Have you done such as of yet, Your Grace?” Miss Hendrickson asked fluttering her honey eyes at him.

“I have been to Market Day in the village, but other than that I have not seen much of the country past my own estate. Perhaps you would be willing to join me and direct me around to the best sights one day?” The Duke asked knowing it was her meaning by the question.

Miss Hendrickson split into a seductive smile and waved her fan before her as if the thought was a little embarrassing to her.

“I would be more than happy to, Your Grace,” she replied.

The Duke studied Miss Hendrickson then with the eyes that she could very well be his intended wife. She indeed was nice enough to look at. She seemed to have the grace and poise of a duchess and would

quickly find a way into polite society.

There was something about her, however, that unnerved him. He realized somewhat reluctantly that it was the same quality that had discouraged Lady Louisa when last they spoke. She was very limited to only what was expected of her.

He told himself, just as there was more to him, there had to be more to Miss Hendrickson. Yes, she was behaving a very certain way in such settings because she felt the need to say the things he wanted to hear. He only needed to give her a chance to be more. If he could find the time, perhaps really taking her on a carriage ride later this week, he could learn who the real Miss Hendrickson was and no longer find her wanting.

He had rather hoped in such a private setting that she would have relaxed and shown more of her true self than the same lady he danced with at the public ball or was upon their first introduction at Mentheith House.

Rowland considered the overbearing presence of her mother at her side, though. Perhaps if he got the Miss Hendrickson without her mother's presence, she would be more willing to let her mask down and be who she actually was.

Even in the few visits he had with Lady Hendrickson, Rowland had already seen how clearly overbearing she could be with her two daughters. He would have to bide his time yet again and wait until he could get to know Miss Hendrickson on her own before he was ready to make up his mind about her.

Finally, dinner was announced, and the Duke couldn't be more relieved to leave the room and the small party of useless chit chat to a new location.

Lady Louisa sat down at the table with the Duke at the head on her left and his uncle on her right and Lady Hendrickson across from her on the Duke's left. She could tell that Miss Elisabeth was rather irritated that Lady Louisa was on the Duke's other side instead of her. It was custom, however, to seat oneself by rank, and so Miss Elisabeth was placed beside her mother with her sister on the other side.

On Lady Louisa's left was Mr. Vaughan next to him was the Colonel. Lady Louisa was satisfied with the fact of knowing that the Colonel was across from Mary so that they could continue their somewhat intimate conversation that had occurred during the card game earlier.

She was quite apprehensive, however, to be so close to the Duke. After all, their last meeting they had agreed that neither had more to say to the other. What could she possibly do now seated next to him? It would be rude not to at least make light conversation.

"You must have my Elisabeth play for you after the meal, Your Grace," Lady Hendrickson said at the third course. "She is very practiced, and you will find her music and voice beautiful."

"That would be a wonderful delight," the Duke said as he looked down the table at the expectant Miss Elisabeth.

Satisfied with his answer she whispered something over to her sister.

"Do you also play, Lady Louisa?" The Duke asked hoping to include her in some conversation. She had been very quiet for the whole meal only have a few words pass between her and Mr. Vaughan.

Up until this point most of the talking had been done between the Duke, Lady Hendrickson, and Mr. Vaughan.

Lady Louisa looked over at the Duke shocked that he asked in her soft doe eyes.

“I do, Your Grace,” she finally said with her eyes fluttering to her aunt for just a beat before looking back down in embarrassment, “But I fear not as well as my cousin. She far surpasses my abilities.”

“None the less, perhaps we will make a concert of the night?” He suggested.

It was clear that Lady Louisa was getting bullied by her aunt to stay far out of the picture of the evening. He thought it a rather silly thing. Of course, Lady Hendrickson wanted her own eldest daughter to be the center of attention for him, but that was no cause for him to ignore his other guest.

“What a wonderful idea,” Lady Hendrickson said. “Mary shall sing for us as well then. She doesn’t have her sister’s skills on the instrument, but she has a rather agreeable voice to hear.”

It was clear that Lady Hendrickson was keen on keeping the focus on her own daughters at all costs. Of course, her eldest was preferable to her cause, but she would choose either over Lady Louisa.

“I am not terribly skilled, but I can pluck a few keys,” Colonel Jasper announced a bit bashfully. “Perhaps I might accompany you, Miss Mary?”

“I would like that very much,” Miss Mary said with a smile to her pale skin.

Lady Louisa smiled too, clearly seeing the intent going between the two. Her eyes flashed to the Duke, and she was surprised to see him just as satisfied with their interaction. They had a brief moment of silent civility as they both shared the knowledge in Jasper’s and Miss

Mary's secret feelings for the other.

"May I ask, Lady Louisa, if it is not music that you find yourself drawn to, what do you enjoy practicing your talents in instead? Perhaps taking long walks? After all, I have caught you doing so twice now," he added with a playful tease.

Lady Louisa saw her aunt's eyes fall on her in frustration. She didn't like the fact that the Duke had apparently met her twice and not just once on the road as Lady Hendrickson had previously thought.

"I can't say that I had enjoyed the exercise extensively before coming here, Your Grace. But the fresh air of the country has been so invigorating; it is so much different than London."

"Had you spent most of your time in London then and never returned to your father's country seat? My understanding is that it is not far off from this county." "No, it is not far," Lady Louisa agreed. "But my mother enjoyed town so much we rarely left it. I have been to the Duke of Wintercrest's estate on a few occasions to visit with a very good friend of mine, but outside of that, I rarely left London."

"And you didn't find that part of the country very enjoyable?" He continued in conversation.

"Well, it wasn't that it was miserable. The weather didn't afford leaving the house much when I was there. I may have just arrived during bad parts of the season, though."

"So now you are finding the area here most exhilarating," Rowland assumed for her. "And have you been to visit your brother at all, since he would be so close? Or did he also choose to stay in town as your parents have?"

"He is actually in the Colonies right now, or I suppose what use to be the Colonies, with his new wife."

"Really," the Duke said his eyes sparked with interest. "I have yet to

see that land. Pray tell, what does your brother think of it?"

"He is very much of the adventurous mentality, much like yourself, Your Grace. He and his wife went to oversee some property my father had acquired there before his death. In the course of the trip Abigail had a boy, and so they are choosing to stay until he is strong enough for the travel."

"His wife went with him?" The Duke said with surprise.

"I know it might have been a little unorthodox, but they were newlywed at the time of the trip and quite unwilling to separate from one another. Plus, Abigail is just as high spirited as my brother. I believe if Colton had tried to go without her, she would have snuck on the ship anyway," Lady Louisa added with a fond smile.

"You seem to have great affection for Lord Gilchrist.

You two must have been very close growing up," Rowland said with a bit of longing for the companionship of a sibling in his younger years.

"Yes, we were always very close. Colton was sort of a protector of mine growing up. I couldn't be happier for him of course, and I do love Abigail dearly as well. It is hard to see one marry and separate themselves from their family to create one of their own."

Lady Louisa was overcome with sadness at that moment as she thought about her brother and how long it had been since she received a letter from him. She knew that change was always inevitable in life, but still, it didn't make the process any less painful.

"Well, you still have yet to expose your great talent. For you must have one as all ladies seem to," Rowland said sensing her sadness at the thought of her brother and wanting to take her feelings away from the unhappiness.

"Perhaps I am one of the few that has no great talent, as one had yet to come to mind," Lady Louisa said modestly.

“For a surety, it is your seamstress ability,” Miss Elisabeth joined in.

She spoke with admiration for Lady Louisa, but Lady Louisa knew that there was no sincerity behind it.

“For truly since she has been here she had done wonders with clothing repairs and embellishments. She is quite diligent at her work as well. One could say she was just as hard working as one of our maids.”

There was the slight that Lady Louisa knew would come. Miss Elisabeth announced that her skills in life were that of a serving class and nothing more.

“I could see how such skills could be a very useful talent,” Rowland countered feeling a sudden strong need to protect the lady.

“I only mean to be useful when I can. I don’t believe I am any better than most ladies.”

“Oh do speak of the garden that you and Miss Mary have been working at so well these past weeks,” Colonel Jasper chimed in. “Miss Mary informed me earlier that you both have been out there every day tending to its needs.”

“I feel that I have learned more from Miss Mary, in that respect, as it is a new skill to me,” Lady Louisa countered. “I have found great interest in reading books on medicinal plants, and Miss Mary has shown me the way to put that reading to practice.”

“And what plans do you have for your medicinal garden then?” the Duke asked both Lady Louisa and Miss Mary, “when all your hard work comes to fruition, of course.”

Both ladies looked at each other neither one having actually thought about that point.

“I am afraid we are not entirely sure, Your Grace, as I suspect this is new territory for the both of us,” Miss Mary replied.

“Well, then I must introduce you to Mrs. Vance. She is my cook, and I know is very knowledgeable about such things.”

“Oh, I know of Mrs. Vance, though I have never met her myself,” Miss Mary continued. “Bess has spoken of her on occasion to me. She must have been a midwife of a sort in the village before coming into your employment, Your Grace.”

“Yes,” Rowland agreed. “She is such a wonderful lady and has told me often that she struggles to keep up with those she helps now that she is so far away and kept busy here.”

“I am sure we both,” Lady Louisa said looking down to Miss Mary, “would be happy to assist her and her patients in any way we could.”

“I know Mrs. Vance would greatly appreciate that, and I am rather indebted to her so any way to lighten her labor I am encouraged to do.”

“Indebted how, Your Grace,” Miss Hendrickson said not liking that she had no input in the conversation for some time.

“Well, I had trouble at first acclimating to the country when first arriving and wasn’t very well. She seemed to know all the right medicines necessary to get me back on my feet. That is how I learned in the first place of her unique skill set.”

“I find it is such an admirable career for a working woman, Your Grace,” Miss Hendrickson continued. “How providential you had her here in your house when needed.”

“Surely it is important knowledge for any and all,” Miss Mary interjected. “For we will all take ill some times or know someone who will be in need of such aid. I dare say it is a life skill all should learn.”

Miss Hendrickson shot a sideways dagger at her sister for the contradiction. It was a momentary lap in her place, and Miss Mary quickly corrected it by leaving the conversation.

Lady Louisa seethed in the fact that her young cousin who had so much in her and to say, was always being bullied by her mother and sister to tote the line that they insisted must be played.

It was also clear to Rowland that the train of conversation had displeased Lady Hendrickson and her oldest daughter. Most likely because it was not in praise of Miss Hendrickson, herself. He reminded himself that he was here to begin relations with the miss and that only this should be his sole focus.

“Miss. Hendrickson, please do tell me what songs you had in mind to play for us tonight?” he said to return the conversation back to a dull topic where no real discussion could be made, or opinions surfaced.

“Doesn’t she sing beautifully,” Lady Hendrickson whispered to Rowland as they sat in the drawing room.

He was actually surprised to see it dust free and ready for them. He didn’t think he had entered this room once since arriving at Bassen Park.

“Yes, it is very relaxing,” Rowland said for lack of a better word.

He had listened to Miss Hendrickson impress him with her piano skills for the last twenty minutes. Though she did play fine and sang well, it was all very slow and boring to him. Plus, being after such a filling meal, he was slightly struggling to keep his eyes open. Rowland looked at the other guests sitting and listening. He caught his uncle yawning and smiled inwardly that at least he wasn’t the only one being bored. His eyes fell on Lady Louisa then who sat next to Jasper in her golden dress. She was smiling at something Jasper had just told her before she passed it along to Miss Mary.

He instead wished he knew what they were saying. He felt so detached from the others and really exhausted trying to please Miss Hendrickson and say the words that she wanted to hear.

“I was so glad that your friend, Colonel Jasper, wrote to

Louisa and personally invited her tonight,” Lady Hendrickson whispered to Rowland noticing his distraction from her daughter.

“He did what?” Rowland asked surprised.

After the rake convinced me that Lady Louisa would not want to come anymore than he, Jasper wrote to her and insisted she did. For what possible reason?

“Yes, I believe he has been turned to her. I am sure he wanted to make sure that she knew she was included in the invitation so that he wouldn’t miss a chance to get to know her better.”

“What? No, forgive me, but I don’t think that is correct,”

Rowland began. How was he to tell her that Jasper had already informed Rowland of his desire to get to know Miss Mary better?

“Don’t worry, Your Grace, I made sure to encourage such affection to Lady Louisa,” Lady Hendrickson tried to assure the Duke. She no doubt thought his negative remark was on account of Jasper’s lower status.

“I assured Louisa she would be lucky to have such a man. I know we are all new acquaintances, but I can already see that Your Grace, has impeccable taste in friends. And after all, I am sure it is realistically her only chance. She should take what she can,” Lady Hendrickson added with a sly gossipy tone to her voice.

“And just think,” she continued before he was able to respond, “it will give more opportunity for us to all meet together again and again. I know Your Grace can agree that this evening has already been most enjoyable.”

“Yes, of course,” Rowland agreed without any heart behind it.

He wasn’t sure what irritated him more, that Jasper had gone behind his back and insisted the one Lady he rather not see be here this night, or the fact that Lady Hendrickson had just systematically insulted that lady. If she spoke like this to him, he could only imagine what he said to her in person.

Again he felt the strong desire to protect Lady Louisa from the harsh

conditions of her aunt's house.

Later that night as things were finally winding down, Rowland thought he might get some relief from the constant pretend interest he had in Miss Hendrickson when his uncle approached him.

"I find her a very promising prospect," Mr. Vaughan said. "I can also tell she is most willing. I suspect if you proposed here on the spot you would be married in a fortnight," he said with a jolly smile on his aged face.

"I don't doubt your theory, but I can assure you that no proposal will be happening tonight or any other night."

"Why ever not? She is a perfect specimen. She will serve our purpose well."

"Forgive me, uncle, but I am not yet settled on the fact of a spouse serving a purpose well and nothing more. I would like to also have at least some admiration for the lady."

"Miss Hendrickson has many admirable qualities," Mr. Vaughan retorted.

"Yes, I am aware. I have heard of nothing else all the night long," Rowland said half under his breath. The scolding look from his uncle told him it wasn't quiet enough.

"I know you are insistent on this matter, very insistent in fact."

"I only said I would withhold your inheritance until you married because I wanted to give you incentive."

"And because my parents' will states I don't become of age until thirty you can do so."

"Look, I understand you are a bit reluctant to take on a wife. It is necessary for you, unfortunately. I wouldn't be doing your parents

justice if I didn't do all that I thought they would want me to do on your behalf."

"I just think I need more time Uncle. I want to find someone that I can feel compatible with."

Though Rowland said this, it wasn't the truth. In truth he wanted someone who was willing to accept the marriage and let him go his own way. He had originally thought that Miss Hendrickson would be the one. She seemed so desperate to marry his title at all cost. A night with her, however drastically changed things. She was so self-centered, he didn't think he could stand being in a room with her much longer let alone produce an heir with her.

Both men stopped their conversation when they saw Lady Louisa making her way towards them. Its continuation would have to wait for a more private setting.

"Forgive me for interrupting. I wonder if I might have your permission to ask a footman to show me to Mrs. Vance. I hoped to set up a time to perhaps learn from her when she is not otherwise engaged."

"I will be happy to take you to her myself," the Duke said glad to remove himself from the conversation with his uncle.

"Oh, that is not necessary," Lady Louisa waved off not wanting to be any more of a bother to the Duke. After all, had they not agreed that they would not be in each other's company when it could be helped? Surely this fell into that realm.

"I insist," he said with a smile letting out her arm for Lady Louisa to take.

She hesitated for just a moment before taking it. They walked silently out of the room and down the hall with all eyes on them. Lady Louisa felt scandalized and had a feeling she would pay for this later from her aunt.

“Sorry, but I just needed to get out of there and get some fresher air,” the Duke said in a hushed whisper when they were out the still open doors. “Fredrick, Lady Louisa was wondering if she might have an audience with Mrs. Vance if she isn’t terribly busy.”

“I am sure that Mrs. Vance would be more than happy to, Your Grace. Shall I have her meet you in the breakfast room?” Fredrick asked with the astute air of a seasoned butler.

“That sounds perfect,” I will escort Lady Louisa there now.

He walked her silently across the hall and through another door. It was easy to see why this was called the breakfast room. It had large windows with floor length curtains drawn back. Out in the darkness Lady Louisa could just make out the rose bushes she had seen coming in. She expected it was a beautiful view every morning.

He walked Lady Louisa over to sit on a sofa while a footman came in simultaneously to light candelabras around the room.

“I feel you are going through too much trouble for me, Your Grace,” Lady Louisa said a little uneasy.

“Nonsense, I would have taken any opportunity to leave that drawing room in truth.”

She looked up at the Duke who had yet to take a seat. He did look very irritated from this angle.

“It didn’t seem like you were not enjoying yourself,” Lady Louisa said in honesty.

“Yes, I suppose its all that false representation of myself that I apparently am so good at and you detest so vehemently.”

“I don’t detest you,” Lady Louisa said.

He looked down at her with disbelief written on his face.

"If it were so," Lady Louisa continued, "I simply would not come at all. I believe life is too short to spend it on things that only bring you unhappiness."

"I believe the reason you are here tonight is that Jasper insisted you should, though I have no idea why he would care to do such a thing."

Lady Louisa was surprised that the Duke was aware of the letter she got.

"Lady Hendrickson informed me that you received a note from him. She is under the impression that he has interest in you," he added with a chuckle. Lady Louisa was a little off put by his laugh. Was it really so abhorrent that the Colonel could have interest in one such as her?

Lady Louisa did her best to check her hurt feelings. Colonel Jasper had asked her to give the Duke a second chance. She had come at his request. It would seem, however, that the man was everything she had thought and perhaps more. It was one thing to politely pretend to enjoy an evening you weren't; it was quite another for him to suggest that she was unworthy of affection from anyone in his acquaintance.

She cleared her throat before speaking.

"I am terribly sorry for the confusion, Your Grace," she said rather coolly. "Perhaps I should have corrected my aunt right there, but she would not see things any other way. I was unwilling to explain to her the true reasoning for my hesitation to come tonight. I probably should have. I will be sure to correct my aunt's gross miscalculation that any man might have interest in a lady such as I at my earliest possibility."

He looked down at her with narrowed green eyes and opened his mouth to speak. Before words could escape the door opened, and Mrs. Vance walked into the room.

Mrs. Vance's hair was frizzed around her cap, and her plump cheeks

were flushed, no doubt from rushing to the breakfast room as quickly as possible from all the way downstairs in the kitchen.

“Your ladyship,” she said with a curtsy. “I was told you wish to speak to me. I do hope that the meal was to your liking.”

“Yes, Mrs. Vance,” Lady Louisa said standing and turning all her attention to the cook. “I actually was wondering if we could perhaps discuss another matter that you might help me with?”

“I would be happy to help you in any way I can,” Mrs. Vance said standing as tall as she could muster for her robust size.

“I shall leave you two ladies to business then,” the Duke announced he turned to Lady Louisa and bowed politely, “I bid you good evening.”

Before any more words could be uttered, he took three long strides and exited the room. He stopped for just a moment in the hall to tell Fredrick to give his condolences to the guest.

He couldn't bear to go back into that room and pretend to enjoy himself after having yet another blow from Lady Louisa. She always seemed to do her best to see nothing but the worst in him.

Giving his message to the butler, he bounded up the stairs and to the privacy of his own quarters. He knew he would get flack from his uncle on the morrow for such rude behavior, but he cared very little for that at the moment. He was ready for this whole ordeal to be over and his life to go back to the way it was. If only he could find a way to make that possibility a reality.

Lady Louisa was pretty sure that she might have been a little quick to take offense by the next morning. Things did always seem much clearer after a night of rest after such a long and tedious night like the one before.

She was confused by his bidding of goodnight when he left her with Mrs. Vance in the breakfast room. All was made clear after her discussion with the cook and returning to the drawing room. The Duke never returned stating that he was suddenly not feeling well and to please excuse him for the night.

She then proceeded to be railed on by her aunt and elder cousin of what she could have possibly done or said to him to offend him so. She was still determined that if anyone should be hurt by their time in the breakfast room, it should be her.

Perhaps he didn't mean the words to come out as he said them but he still said them. It had nothing to do with the jealous feelings welling deep down inside her every time she heard him compliment Miss Elisabeth.

Lady Louisa had to admit that she was a bit relieved when they first spoke alone in that breakfast room and he told her of the tedium he too felt over the night. She couldn't believe all that he had been subjected to from Miss Elisabeth and then to take it with such an air of appreciation and flow of compliments was astonishing to Lady Louisa at first.

But then it also just solidified the fact that the Duke was no more than a spineless creature who did and said anything to please others. How

could someone like that ever be trusted when the fact of the matter was they would say anything, disguise themselves in any way, to get the desired result.

Lady Louisa was determined to shake all ideas of the Duke promptly out of her head. This would be a complicated matter as she would be seeing his cook later that afternoon.

Mrs. Vance was all too ready to help Lady Louisa with her medicinal garden endeavors. She even suggested that Lady Louisa return the following day from their discussion in the afternoon so that she might show her around Mrs. Vance's own medicinal herb garden.

Perhaps if Lady Louisa was not quite so exhausted at the time from listening to Miss Elisabeth's high pitched singing all night long she would have the clarity of thought to suggest they meet elsewhere. As it was, the meeting was set, and Lady Louisa could not cancel it.

"I must confess I was very disappointed with your behavior last night," Rowland's uncle announced upon finally finding him sitting in the library.

"Uncle James, I know you are, but I fear I have no way to make you feel better about the matter," Rowland said finding himself feeling decidedly defeated at the moment.

He spent the whole night in his room tossing in his bed wondering how he could have said things so wrong to Lady Louisa and on two different occasions. Even worst was the fact he cared so much about it and didn't know why.

"I suggest you find one," Mr. Vaughan said sternly looking down at his nephew. It was much the way he tried to scold him as a child. "You could start by telling me why on earth you left your own dinner party without so much as a farewell. It was very embarrassing for me to see the ladies off after such an event."

"I couldn't bring myself to return to the room," Rowland simply

answered.

“Why ever not?”

“Because I was sure that if I did, I would have told Miss Elisabeth Hendrickson what I truly thought of her incessant chatter about herself. Ugh,” he said getting up from his seat and pacing the room. “I could bear it no longer. I am tired of these stupid superficial games. If this is what it takes to get my inheritance, then I am quite ready to wait until my thirtieth birthday, Uncle.”

“You could force me to be a beggar on the streets until then, and I wouldn’t care in the least. I cannot bring myself to marry at this time. I will not be subjected to pretending that I care when I don’t. I have no desire to have wife hold me down, and I don’t know that I ever will be.”

“My boy,” Mr. Vaughan said in a softer tone as he took his nephew’s place on the cushioned chair. “It is my fault really that you feel this way. I influenced you against such a thing. You must know that I am the exception to a rule that must be followed.”

“Then perhaps I will follow it, perhaps I will not. Why does it matter so much that I am not an exception also?”

“Because you have a title to think on. With no heir of your own, and certainly none from me, there would be no one left. Do you really want your father, and grandfather’s and great-grandfather’s legacy to end in such a way? It is not always easy, these responsibilities we are born into. But this is yours, and you must find a way to bear it. The sooner you do this, the better. There are certainly worst things in life,” he added with a lopsided smile.

Rowland didn’t answer but instead stared into the unlit fireplace as he thought over his uncle’s words.

“Listen, Lady Hendrickson suggested something last night, and I rather like the idea. Let us have a private ball here at the estate. We will

invite all the ladies and respectable families in all the counties surrounding the area. Perhaps then you will find a girl who peaks your interest.”

“The problem with this is all these ladies see is the Duke and not the man I am. They will not be themselves, and I won't be able to be myself. How am I to discern an agreeable match in such situation?”

His uncle thought on this for a few moments. It was clear that Rowland was looking for that elusive fairytale that children were fed. That he would find love. James Vaughan knew it to be a fantasy and nothing more.

“We shall make it a masquerade ball,” Mr. Vaughan announced after a few moments of contemplation. “No one will know one from the other if so desired. In that way, you can find the truth and realize that your silly dream of a perfect match is nothing but that, a dream.”

“And if I don't find someone to my liking, will I be forced to choose anyway or suffer consequence?” Rowland asked his uncle with a wiry look to his emerald eyes.

His uncle gave a long huff, “If I stick you in a room full of eligible beautiful women all hoping to marry you and you yet to find one to your liking, I will have to suppose that all my years influencing you have rotted you to the core, and there is no other hope. I will be guilt free knowing I did all I could for the sake of your parents. Your soul will be in your own hands,” Mr. Vaughan announced before rising from his seat and leaving the room.

The arrangement seemed agreeable to Rowland. It would give him a proper chance to search out a possible companion in earnest, and also free him of the obligation if he was unable to do so, which he found very likely.

He thought if he would be able to hurry the proceedings then perhaps he could be done with the matter and set sail for the Indies before any winter storms settled in. With that hopeful thought in his head, he

began to orchestrate the preparations needed that very moment.

Lady Louisa was very hesitant as she arrived at Bassen Park. It was a massive estate, however, and the likelihood of her actually seeing the Duke was no doubt very small. It was an interaction she didn't want to deal with. In all honesty, she wasn't even entirely sure how she would deal with it.

Luckily when the butler, whom she recognized as Fredricks, opened the door he showed her straight back to the kitchen without any interruption. From there she all her attention was given to Mrs. Vance, and all apprehension left her.

The afternoon was first spent walking the gardens directly behind the kitchen. They were vast and glorious to behold. Though Mrs. Vance couldn't grow everything she needed, she endeavored to grow as much as possible right here on the property. She was sure that it made the produce that much sweeter to the taste.

While they talked of various plants and herbs and their medicinal properties, Mrs. Vance also shared a lot about herself with Lady Louisa. Mrs. Vance had not grown up far from Bassen Park, and her father was even a gardener of the property before the house was shut up for the extended time. Even after the house was closed down, he still came to tend to the gardens and park in proximity to the estate.

It was because of this dedication that the Duke sought her family out immediately upon arrival. Though her father had passed, he had also given Mrs. Vance all his knowledge of the land and the ability to produce incredible nourishment from it.

Up until the Duke's return, she had solely used that knowledge to help others with any ailments in the village. Lady Louisa learned that the nearest doctor was at least a day's ride away. She was very often the only source of help in situations of illness, accident, or birth.

"You must be very busy all the time," Lady Louisa remarked. "I do feel poorly to know that I am taking up your free time when you must get

so little of it.”

“I don’t mind it at all. In fact, I rather like having someone to pass knowledge on to as I have no children of my own. I must admit,” Mrs. Vance said as she looked around as if she was about to spill a deep dark secret, “I have a bit of a selfish reason for it as well.” “And what is that?” Lady Louisa asked.

“I was hoping if I showed you a thing or two, your ladyship wouldn’t mind tending to those in need when I can’t. It wouldn’t be anything horrible or the like. Just perhaps if a child goes sick or the like. I could show you what to do real simple like, and it would be a great relief to me knowing that someone was available when I couldn’t be.”

“Mrs. Vance I scarcely think you could have asked a more willing participant.”

Mrs. Vance gave a sigh of relief at her words.

“Now, it seems you know well about the various uses of plants,” Mrs. Vance said while she rubbed her hands together as if they were truly now getting down to business.

“Yes, I have been studying in books for some months now on different herbs and their uses. It is what inspired me to plant the garden here. I am afraid I know nothing past what I have read in books, however.”

“That’s quite fine. Let’s come inside,” she waved and started the way back into the house. “I will show you how to dry and press what needs it. Then we can move on to extractions and teas.”

Lady Louisa happily followed behind her teacher as they made their way back into the kitchen for the rest of her lesson today. She promised herself to pay close attention to all the knowledge that Mrs. Vance could give her so that she could also pass it along to Miss Mary. She was sure her youngest cousin would also find this work most interesting.

Over two hours later Lady Louisa was making her way back down the Duke's gravel road with her basket now full of dried herbs and various bottled concoctions and a list of names to visit over the next week.

She was feeling a little apprehensive to the task but also relished actually having some use beyond adding embellishments to her aunt and cousin's clothing.

"Lady Louisa," she turned at the sound of her name being called.

For a second, she tensed at the male voice that it might be the Duke. Upon turning around, however, she was pleasantly surprised to see Colonel Jasper hurrying over to her.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," she said as he finally reached her.

"I'm so glad I ran into you. I was hoping to ask if your opinion of the Duke changed after last night. You two seemed to be getting along well during the meal."

Lady Louisa hesitated a moment longer. She wondered how much of the disaster that was the end of the evening she actually wanted to share with the gentleman.

"Unfortunately, though I can say that I have found a great many friends in the Duke's circle, I don't believe the Duke, and I are ever destined to get along. May I ask why you concern yourself with this so much?"

Colonel Jasper looked down at her out of the corner of his eye as if

the answer was so obvious. However, Lady Louisa suspected he would not say the thoughts in his mind.

“I only wish that all of us can get along well to encourage more time together.”

“For Miss Mary, no doubt,” Lady Louisa added nudging him with her shoulder.

The Colonel joined her as she continued to walk down the lane and when she teased, he gave his own youthful nudge in return. Though he was much older than her, and very much older than Miss Mary, Lady Louisa thought the two of them made a very fine match indeed.

“Perhaps being able to enjoy Miss Mary’s company as often as possible is part of the reason.”

“Well, you can do that easy enough without me. In fact, I might encourage such thing,” Lady Louisa added thinking about how Miss Elisabeth and her aunt still insisted that the Colonel had affection for her.

“Well, I said, it is only part of the reason,” the Colonel stated without further explanation.

Lady Louisa looked up at the Colonel hoping to glean other reasons from his facial expression. All she caught, however, was the shimmer of light off of the gray hair at either side of his temples. She rather thought it made him look very distinguished.

“I suppose you plan to keep your other reason a secret from me?”

“I do.”

“Well then, I am not sure if I can condone your courtship of my younger cousin and in fact may have to protest to Lady Hendrickson as well,” Lady Louisa said with her chin out sarcastically.

“I don’t think a fine lady such as yourself would ever do such a thing.”

“I may have to. I mean,” Lady Louisa continued as if the ideas were all coming to her and seemed rather appalling, “not only do you seem to have secret agendas, you are also a military man. Does that not mean that Miss Mary would move around often with you as the militias stations are changed. How would Lady Hendrickson feel to lose her youngest daughter from her presence.”

“Well, I am happy to inform you that since meeting Miss Mary I have been considering selling my commission and staying here in the area.”

Lady Louisa stopped for a moment surprised at his words.

“You are? I had no idea. I was only joking, I never meant,” she seemed to stumble on her own words in embarrassment.

“I know,” he simply replied. “Honestly, I was considering it from the start. Rowland is really my only family so if I am to sell my Commission this is where I will stay. I guess it really all depends on if Rowland does decide to stay at Bassen long term.”

“Why would he not? I suppose he would go to town for the seasons but don’t most Lords settle in their country home upon marrying?”

“I don’t think Rowland has quite got the adventuring bone out of his body yet. In his mind, he will marry and then return to his travels leaving his wife here.”

“I don’t think any wife would enjoy that prospect. Who would marry him with such knowledge?”

“A woman not caring if he was around or not. A woman looking for the elevation more than the man I suppose.”

“Even still,” Lady Louisa hesitated to agree with his meaning. “I still don’t imagine someone marrying with such perimeters.”

She thought back to when he had initially spoken to her and asked for any assistance. Had he hoped she would seek out a desperate lady caring more for her own elevation in position and not having any desire to have companionship with the man.

“Trust me; I have tried to talk him out of his madness. He has yet to see reason. I have a feeling that until he actually meets a maiden that interests him truly, he will have no desire to change from his previous lifestyle.”

He looked down at Lady Louisa with a knowing eye.

“Men are a fickle species. We tend to find things that work well for us and then like to stay that way. When change is pressed upon us we fight it until we realize the value of it. Rowland has yet to see the value.”

“Or I suppose, in his case, found the value.” “Precisely,” Colonel Jasper agreed.

Colonel Jasper was kind enough to walk Lady Louisa all the way back to Mentheith House. Much to Miss Mary’s delight he also agreed to stay the afternoon for a light picnic luncheon.

Lady Louisa couldn’t help but watch the two interact with each other knowing that very likely they might be joined together. The age difference seemed no difference. Miss Mary was very mature for such a young lady, and he was quite youthful as of yet.

Lady Louisa was amazed that her aunt could not see the blossoming romance between the two. Lady Hendrickson still insisted on recommending Lady Louisa in every way to the Colonel and even couldn’t help but whisper to Miss Elisabeth that she wasn’t surprised that he had walked Lady Louisa home.

Lady Louisa was inclined to let the illusion play out for the benefit of her youngest cousin, however. Lady

Hendrickson and Miss Elisabeth never truly painted

Colonel Jasper in a good light when they spoke of him.

Though Lady Louisa couldn't see how they found fault in such a gracious and kind man, they seemed to find a way to do it. Lady Louisa was sure that Lady Hendrickson would not approve of the man for her own daughter at this time.

Lady Louisa only hoped that if she bought some time for the two to grow a relationship together without her mother's understanding, that Lady Hendrickson would come around with the opportunity to know him better.

The rest of the week went on quite smoothly. Lady Louisa went to town four more times with her basket of herbs and list of patients. At first, she was timid and shy as she knocked on each door. By the beginning of the next week, she felt she knew most people in the village well enough that she was no longer filled with trepidation as she stood on each threshold.

Miss Mary happily went with her as many times as Lady Hendrickson would allow it. Unfortunately, it was not often, and when the case did happen, it would be preceded by a lengthy discussion on who they would be attending too.

Apparently, Lady Hendrickson only found specific people in the village acceptable for her daughters to associate with. While Lady Louisa could understand wanting to see to your daughter's safety, she also thought some of her aunt's objections were a little silly and uncalled for.

On the afternoon of the following week, Lady Louisa returned from her trip to see little Jemmy who was sick in bed with a rather nasty chest cold and was hoping to spend the rest of the day in the garden and away from her aunt. Instead, she entered the house to find a great commotion and excitement.

Instead of heading straight back to the garden like she had wished to, she instead removed her hat and gloves and made her way to the drawing room. Inside she saw all three ladies standing and talking excitedly. Even Miss Mary who often kept her cool when the others didn't, was joining in the merriment.

"Whatever is going on?" Lady Louisa asked intrigued.

All three ladies eyes turned and looked at her.

"Oh, you're back," Lady Hendrickson said with a deflated air.

"We have all been invited to a masquerade ball," Miss Mary said.

The two older ladies looked at her not necessarily happy that she spread the news, though there would have been no way to help it.

"Really?" Lady Louisa said catching on to the excitement.

"I am sure it will all seem rather dull for you. You must attend so many balls during a season in London. I wouldn't be offended at all if you don't wish to come," Lady Hendrickson added.

Lady Louisa was really starting to feel tired of her aunt's dislike. She was somewhat of the opinion that she had given this family relationship the best go she could for her mother's benefit and had no desire to do it any longer. If it were not for the people who she had been helping in the village, no doubt she would have returned to London already.

"Actually, I have never been to a masquerade ball before. It sounds entertaining, and I do wish to attend if you would allow it, Lady Hendrickson."

"Oh, well I suppose if you want to so badly," she added with an exaggerated look to her face.

"Will it be in the public tent again?" Lady Louisa asked.

“It is even better,” Miss Mary said. “The Duke of Rowland will be hosting it at Bassen Park. Aren’t private balls just wonderful? I have also heard that he has invited every fine family in three counties.”

“Yes,” Lady Hendrickson said now turning to her youngest daughter, something she didn’t often do. “That means that not only will your sister have an opportunity to win over her match, but you too may find a Lord worth your while.”

“I can’t say that I need a chance to win over the Duke. I am sure I have already done so,” Miss Elisabeth said with a haughty air.

“If that were the case, my dear,” her mother retorted, “Then he wouldn’t be having the ball at all. Clearly, he is still looking, and you have not done enough to impress him.”

Miss Elisabeth sat down in a sulk. She was not accustomed to being chastened by her mother or being told that her charms were not working.

“We must order dresses right away,” Lady Hendrickson announced ignoring her daughter's pout. “And then there is the costume aspect of it that we must consider. I suspect most ladies will make themed costumes so we must begin to think of the same before we order the garments. I do hope that they will be ready, the ball is such short notice.”

“How short, Lady Hendrickson?” Lady Louisa asked still having not actually seen the invitation.

“Only two weeks.”

“I am not sure if even Mrs. Esquire at the dress shop can complete three dresses in such time, especially since she will no doubt have many orders,” Miss Mary chimed in.

“That is a concern,” Lady Hendrickson said as she too sat and began to ponder the problem.

She absentmindedly fitted with a lace ribbon on her black dress as she considered the predicament. She certainly would not like to go in a gown worn in the past. No matter the cost, and the fact that the house was already short of funds, she would have her daughters shine that night.

Lady Hendrickson did feel she shone the most in this type of situations where the skill of mind must be put to use to solve problems in a unique way.

“Perhaps we could have her make us the basics of the garments and send them to us to embellish on our own. After all Lady Louis is so good at her sewing skills, there is no doubt that she could turn them out perfectly in time.”

“I would be happy to help, Lady Hendrickson. My only concern would be the time I have spent in the village helping the ill in Mrs. Vance’s place. I am not sure I will have much time for sewing.”

“Well then you will just stop going to the village, it is as simple as that,” Lady Hendrickson replied.

“I don’t mean to offend you, Lady Hendrickson,” Lady Louisa said as delicately as she could, “but I feel their needs far outweigh the needs of embellishing dresses for a dance.”

Miss Elisabeth scoffed at her words. She side glanced at her mother apparently looking for any chance to get back in her mother’s good graces.

Lady Hendrickson on the other had raised herself to her full seated height and narrowed her already small eyes on Lady Louisa.

“I did hope that having you here in my home, would be a great relief to me in such a time of need. I am sorry if that is an inconvenience to you. Though now that I look at the invitation,” she continued glancing over the parchment in her hand. “It is only addressed to Lady Hendrickson and her two daughters. Your name doesn’t seem to

appear on it at all.”

“Of course I would be happy to take you as my guest, and sure the Duke would not mind such a thing, but I cannot fathom I will have the ability to entertain you as a guest if we cannot have our garments made in time.” Lady Louisa gave out a deep and long sigh. It was just the type of manipulation she greatly detested. She wondered if the ball was really worth going to for all of this. Yes, it was an exciting idea to go to a masquerade ball. It was less enticing to find out it was at the house of the Duke.

None the less, it was the excitement of the event and after all her whole main purpose of coming to her aunt was to help in any way that she could. So with great reserve, she agreed to focus all her attention on assisting the ladies as they prepared for the quickly approaching event. Perhaps if she were lucky she would also find a way to sneak to town and see her patients as well.

The night of the masquerade ball finally came and not without its difficulties. Not only was the gown shopped fully booked with orders there seemed no way for new gowns to be made.

This, however, didn't deter Lady Hendrickson. Instead, she bought bolts of fabric and insisted that Lady Louisa work tirelessly to create a new gown for each lady. Many late nights Lady Louisa stayed up working on the garments.

Though Miss Mary wouldn't dare to do so in her mother's presence, often after the others went to sleep, she too would stay by Lady Louisa's side and work to create the garments. It was a good thing too, for Lady Louisa was sure she would have never finished three dresses otherwise.

During their quiet nights together Lady Louisa also learned many tidbits of information about her aunt. Not only was she choosing to live beyond her means it was also causing a problem for the two daughters. If Miss Elisabeth or Miss Mary were not to marry off well and quickly, they would be destitute within the year's end.

It was for this reason, and to be sure many others, that Miss Mary had kept her feelings about the Colonel a secret. Only when Lady Louisa brought up the matter, and after several minutes of denial, did Miss Mary admit that she did feel very fondly for the man and hoped he would ask her to marry him soon.

"I feel like such a deceiver," Miss Mary said the night of the ball as they both got ready in Miss Mary's room. "Colonel Jasper has no idea of my mother's disapproval of him, or the fact that it is predominantly

because she wishes me to marry a man that can take care of her acquired debt.”

“I know Colonel Jasper cares for you deeply as well. I don’t think it’s deceptive of you to keep your mother’s dislike from him. Certainly, he can already decipher her character. And of the debts, could the Colonel even help in such a situation?” Lady Louisa responded as she handed some pearls to Bess who was stringing them in Miss Mary’s hair.

“I don’t know, honestly. But even if he had the means, I would not want to ask such a thing of him. It doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Nor I,” Lady Louisa agreed. “But perhaps if, after you are properly engaged, of course, you tell your mother he doesn’t have the means she will be at peace and hopeful curtail her spending.”

“I can not bear to tell my mother things she will not like. You have only seen a small portion of how severe she can really become. My only hope, I hate to say, is if Elisabeth does secure the Duke this night. If she is able to accomplish this task, my mother will not care who I marry knowing she will be secure with Elisabeth’s choice.”

Lady Louisa found the logical truth in Miss Mary’s words, but she still didn’t like it. No matter how much she rather detested the Duke’s methods and ideals for marriage, she still would not wish her cousin Elisabeth even on him.

Miss Elisabeth had been nothing short of insufferable the last two weeks. Twice she changed her fabric choice, and once she insisted that Lady Louisa complete remove a hem of her skirt and redo it with smaller stitches. She claimed it was nowhere near the quality that she was used to.

It was infuriating. But all the while that Lady Louisa worked, she did so with her mouth clamped shut. She would do all that she could to please her aunt and cousin. At the end of the ball, she would return home to London knowing that she had done everything in her power

for the sake of her own mother.

Now that the night of the ball was upon them, Lady Louisa couldn't help but feel a sigh of relief that this whole ordeal would finally be over. She would be sad to leave Miss Mary and Mrs. Vance and the Colonel, but outside of those few new friends she made there was little that she would miss of her time in the country.

She was sure that if she were to live in her family's London house the rest of her days she would be more than satisfied. She had also considered the words of the solicitor about her brother. Perhaps he would stay in the Colonies permanently. If that was the case, then she would brave the wild ocean and join him there.

Traveling to the Americas was something she never would have considered in the past. The one great thing that came out of her time her in the Lake District was all the things she had accomplished on her own. She rather thought of herself as a very independent woman and had little fear about crossing the ocean on her own.

"And now for the mask," Bess said waking Lady Louisa from her own thoughts.

She picked up the white silk covered mask and placed it on Miss Mary's face and wove the ribbons through her hair for secure placement. Decorating the mask was delicate white feathers with the black outline of swan eyes. She looked absolutely exquisite in her delicate matching white silk dress gathered and ruffled to match a swan's plume.

"I would not doubt if the Colonel proposed on the spot tonight when he first sets eyes on you," Lady Louisa exclaimed.

"Do I really look alright?" Miss Mary asked as she spied herself skeptically in the looking glass.

"Mary you look like an angel. Now hop on out of that chair so I can work my magic on Lady Louisa's hair before you must leave," Bess

said in a playful tone.

“Do not worry yourself too much. If you can make it as half as beautiful as last time that will be sufficient for me,” Lady Louisa said as she took Miss Mary’s place in front of the looking glass.

Lady Louisa hadn’t had much time to prepare herself for the ball. For that reason, she had chosen to wear the same golden yellow dress that she wore to Bassen on her last visit. She quickly created a mask by covering it in feathers dipped in gold paint.

She didn’t care much to stand out at large partied events and was sure she would be the least dressed of the night, and she was fine with that. Her only wish was to enjoy the night and the final ball before she returned home to London.

Finally, she was ready. Bess had yet again done her magic to wrap in her hair a length of linen fabric in white with a gold print of fleur de lis. Between the material and the golden mask, Lady Louisa scarcely could recognize her own self.

Both ladies came downstairs and waited for just a moment before they were joined by Lady Hendrickson and Miss Elisabeth.

Though Lady Hendrickson was technically still in mourning, she had chosen to wear a cream silk dress with green silk embroidery ivy all along the front of it. Lady Louisa’s fingers tingled as she looked at each intricate embroidery stitch she had used to make the gown. Her mask was a compilation of green and blue ribbons folded to look like leaves.

Behind her, Miss Elisabeth stole the focus of the whole room with her dress. It was made of the most elegant blue and green and purple silks all layered and ruffled on top of each other. Around her lace trimmed neckline was an array of ostrich feathers encircling her like a halo.

Her mask was all gold, and unlike like the others who couldn’t remove theirs, hers was on a stick for her to hold to her face when desired.

She wanted to make certain that the Duke would single her out and know for a surety that it was Miss Elisabeth Hendrickson that would be taking his breath away this night. Along with the gold mask and stick was another plum of ostrich feathers she held in her hand to complete the whole look.

“Before we leave, let us all have a sherry. I fear my nerves are quite unraveled from the stress of all this preparation for tonight,” Lady Hendrickson announced.

Mr. Johnson quickly appeared with four small glasses of sherry wine and each was taken in turn.

“A wonderful idea, Mother,” Elisabeth said. “I am so nervous I have been shaking like a leaf,” she added.

Lady Hendrickson, who stood between Miss Elisabeth and Lady Louisa, leaned over to her daughter to give her a pat of comfort with her hand. While doing this, she ever so subtly reached out her glass in the opposite direction and tipped it down the front of Lady Louisa’s dress.

Lady Louisa who hadn’t noticed the movement, jumped and gasped as the cold ran down the front of her soaking her yellow dress with the red liquid.

“Oh my dear, I am so sorry,” Lady Hendrickson said righting her cup again as if she had not noticed the motion while comforting her daughter. “Please do forgive me. As I said, my nerves are just all over the place. I am beside myself.”

Immediately Mr. Johnson reappeared with a wet rag.

“That won’t due at all,” Lady Hendrickson said. “Your dress seems to be stained.”

“We can wait while Louisa changes,” Miss Mary chimed in almost completely sure it was not an accident.

Her mother had no desire for Lady Louisa to attend this ball and contend with the Hendrickson daughters for eligible bachelors.

"I am afraid the carriage is already waiting. We can't be late. The night is far too important. I'm sorry Louisa," Lady Hendrickson said. "I suppose you can't go."

"We can give her just a few minutes to change, Mother," Miss Mary insisted.

"How can you be so selfish," Miss Elisabeth said to shut down her sister. "This could very well be the most important night of my life, and you wish to ruin it?"

"Forgive me, your ladyship," Mr. Johnson said who still held the rag. "Perhaps I could take Lady Louisa in the cart once she is ready."

He turned to Lady Louisa.

"I know it would not be a fine carriage, but it would do the job of getting you there," he added humbly.

Lady Hendrickson opened and closed her mouth a few times having not anticipated her own staff turning against her plan.

"Do whatever you want," she said handing over her now empty cups to the butler and waving her daughters to follow her.

"Hurry and change," Miss Mary said in a whisper. "I have plenty of dresses in my room to choose from if you didn't bring any more. You may have your pick of any of them," she reached forward and gingerly hugged her cousin without their dresses touching.

Lady Louisa, though still shocked by it all, was at least a little relieved to have Miss Mary there and the butler to fight on her behalf. She couldn't imagine having gone through all the work the past two weeks to prepare for the ball, given up so many of her trips to the village to help any sick in need, all to not be able to go to the masquerade

herself.

The Duke of Rowland couldn't have possibly dreaded this night any more than he already did, that was until the guests started to arrive. With every greeting and introduction, he gave standing in the foyer he was growing more and more dissatisfied with the whole silly idea that his uncle had concocted.

On the contrary, Mr. James Vaughan was very proud of himself as he watched lady after lady enter the house. He was sure tonight his nephew would feel that quick and temporary rush that was love. It would be enough, and Mr. Vaughan could finally rest easy knowing he had done right by his brother and sister-in-law and preserved the dukedom.

"Lady Hendrickson, Miss Elisabeth Hendrickson, and Miss Mary Hendrickson," the footman announced as the three ladies walked up to greet their host.

Rowland was a little surprised to see that their cousin, Lady Louisa, was not accompanying them this night. He rather thought it had much to do with the conversation they had shared last. Strangely he was disappointed by her absence.

"Good Evening Lady Hendrickson, Miss Hendrickson,

Miss Mary," he greeted each one in turn. "Is Lady Louisa not here with you tonight?" He couldn't help but ask.

"Unfortunately she was not feeling well enough to come," Lady Hendrickson replied not at all happy that the first words out of the Duke's mouth were to inquire over Lady Louisa.

Rowland had to forcibly stop himself from opening his mouth in shock when Miss Elisabeth stood before him, and he set eyes on her for the first time. He had seen his fair share of overdone women this night, but surely Miss Elisabeth was the most so.

“You look very lovely tonight, Miss Hendrickson,” he said in as steady of a voice as he could possibly muster.

He waited till the trio had left his hearing before leaning over to his uncle.

“Perhaps it was a right thing to pass on Miss Elisabeth,” Mr. Vaughan said before Rowland even got a word out.

“I swear I thought I was looking at a painting of Queen Elisabeth dressed as a giant bird,” Mr. Vaughan added as his eyes followed the trio of ladies as they entered the rest of the throngs of people.

Once a man far too close to her turned and got a face full of feathers. It was a struggle for both the Duke and his uncle not to laugh.

Lady Louisa was feeling rather jolted and still hadn’t quite caught her breath from the rush of everything. After Lady Hendrickson left the house, Lady Louisa immediately ran up the stairs while tears of frustration stung her eyes.

She was sure that her few months living with her aunt had far surpassed any teasing and taunting she received as a child. For a few moments, she had entertained the idea of just staying home.

It was after all what Lady Hendrickson intended by her little stunt. It was also what she was expecting. Lady Hendrickson was hoping Lady Louisa to be spineless and stay home. She would not do so this time.

For once Lady Louisa would not wait for her brother to come to her rescue and stand up for her. She was going to stand on her own two feet for herself.

Perhaps it was because Colton was so far away and she no longer had the crutch of knowing he would come to her aid. Perhaps it was after all these weeks of going on her own and making use of herself with the ill and injured that she had gained more courage. More than likely, she had just simply been pushed too far by her aunt, finally.

Lady Louisa no longer cared if her appearance at tonight's ball would upset her aunt. She would not even consider the ramifications it might have for any future relationships between her family and her aunt's family. She was tired of being used by Lady Hendrickson and then thrown to the side as if she didn't matter.

With this deep determination, she rushed to Miss Mary's room. Bess seeing the commotion was already there and getting another evening gown prepared. It was dark forest green with matching ruffles along all the hems. Under the silk along the neckline and flowing from the sleeves was delicate cream lace.

"It's not Miss Mary's. It's Miss Elisabeth's actually. I snuck it out of her room when I saw what Lady Hendrickson did to you. Just horrible. This will look beautiful on you. It will match perfectly with the gold and bring warmth to your skin. Now hurry, and let's get you changed."

Lady Louisa didn't say a single word, only took the lady's maid hand and squeezed it tight in gratitude. It was an exquisitely made dress, though they both agreed to remove several silk ribbon bows that were found at every hem and cross-section of the dress. Miss Elisabeth did tend to do things on the gaudy side of things.

With her new dress on, and a cloak to protect her from the night air in a cart, Lady Louisa descended the stairs for the second time. She found the butler seated in the cart already hitched with a horse and ready to go.

"I fear I will be so late as to make a spectacle of myself," she said to the butler as they started their way towards Bassen Park.

“Oh, I dare say you will be a spectacle tonight, your ladyship. I don’t think it will have anything to do with the time, however,” he said giving her a fatherly wink.

Lady Louisa felt no comfort in his words. She would have rather not made a spectacle of herself in any way. She certainly did look like an entirely different person in Miss Elisabeth’s dress and her hair done so beautifully by Bess.

He pulled up to the front of Bassen Park with the door already shut. In the night air nothing but silence seemed to permeate. The glow of the house was the sole light. No longer were guests filtering in.

She took a deep breath, Mr. Johnson wished her luck, and she gingerly exited the seat next to him on the wooden cart.

Lady Louisa walked slowly up the stone steps wondering if it was wise to arrive so late. Before she had a chance to change her mind, however, the doors opened to her. At least she took solace in the fact that a butler was still present to welcome the last few straggling guests.

“Good evening, Ma’am.”

She nodded politely to his bow and entered the room. With the opening of doors had come a burst of light and the sound of rapid speech from all sorts of people. She found the foyer empty, and the butler motioned with his hand for her to continue forward.

Lady Louisa timidly made her way towards the ambience and sound permeating from the large double door room in front of her. Through the noise, she could still keenly hear the sound of her silken dress rustling as she walked.

She finally entered the largest room filled to the brim with guests. It was an elegant dance hall worthy to rival the one at Wintercrest Manor. Off the main dance hall were several more doors that opened into side rooms.

Each one seemed to be just as filled as the dance hall. Lady Louisa had a hard time even fathoming the number of people in this one house. She guessed there had to be at least a thousand between all the offshoots of rooms and steady crowds going in and out.

Immediately her unannounced entrance brought stares her way from those just next to the door. Lady Louisa quickly looked down embarrassed. She wondered if she should find out her own party. She was sure her aunt had not expected her actually to come and may, in fact, pull another stunt like earlier. It might be best for her to keep her presences secret from them.

Instead, she walked closest to the wall and observed the party goers as she walked from one end of the hall to the other. She had rather hoped to get a glimpse of Miss Mary. She felt no fear in letting her youngest cousin aware of her presence.

It had seemed that just before Lady Louisa's arrival the first dances had begun. Still, only a few couples were found on the dance floor, many still choosing to socialize instead of dancing. Lady Louisa instantly spotted the Colonel dancing on the floor with Miss Mary.

Lady Louisa stood for a few moments and watched as they looked deeply into each other's eyes as they made their ways together and apart with time to the music. She couldn't help but feel the excitement that her little cousin must have been feeling to dance with the man she cared so much for.

Lady Louisa was so lost in enjoying the magic before her between the two that she completely forgot her purpose to avoid her aunt and other cousin. After a few moments of watching Miss Mary, her eyes were drawn to the large peacock feathers floating along the side of the wall in her direction.

It wasn't hard to pick out the elaborately dressed Miss Elisabeth, and the sight of her woke Lady Louisa to her purpose for the night. She pushed back against the wall fearing that Miss Elisabeth might recognize her or worse Miss Elisabeth's own dress.

With her back against the wall, she sidestepped until she felt her hands behind her brush over a doorknob. She turned it and thankfully found it to be unlocked. Not giving a care for what or who might be on the other side, she pushed the door open and as quickly as possible slid into the room.

Lady Louisa shut the door as quietly as she could hoping that no one had noticed her escape. The last thing she wanted was for someone to follow in after her. Before she turned, however, she realized that she was already not alone in this lightly lit room.

With the sound of a man clearing his voice, Lady Louisa reluctantly turned to find herself in a sort of office. The walls had various bookshelves stuffed with books. A small fireplace was against the left wall and next to it was a door no doubt leading out into the main part of the house.

In the far back corner of the room next to some long draped windows was a large oak desk. On it stood a single candelabra that shined light on a masked faced behind the desk.

“Forgive me, I didn’t think this room was open to guests,” Lady Louisa said quickly.

“Then why did you enter it?” The gentleman asked. Lady Louisa laughed at her stupid remark.

“I was trying to escape someone. I was just hoping to slip in and out for a second. Might I ask you the same thing? Why are you in a room that is not for the public?”

“It’s a fair question,” he said rubbing his chin. There was something about the way he walked that seemed familiar but she hadn't yet recognized him.

He was wearing a large death mask with the long pointed nose and a

large skull cap that went over the front part of his hair. Other than his mouth and square chin, Lady Louisa could see nothing of his face.

Rowland had stood at her sudden entrance and now walked around the desk to come closer to her. His breath had been taken away by the sudden appearance of this angel. Everything about her seemed enchanting, and he chalked it up to the mysterious gold mask that hid her identity from him.

Rowland was sure; however, he would have remembered her entrance into his house. She had not been an announced guest that he had greeted at the door.

"I was looking for a little break from the festivities," Rowland finally explained to the lady not yet wanting to expose his identity. "I suppose we both came into this room to hide."

"What part of the festivities did you find a need to hide from?" the lady asked him as she edged along the room.

Rowland wanted to get closer for a better view of the lady; she seemed to edge farther away hoping not to be recognized.

"Well, you see I was hoping this mask would keep others from recognizing me," he said thinking back to how he had not donned his until after greeting all the guests, "But unfortunately I was still known rather easily by most everyone here."

"And your identity must be kept a secret for what reason, pray tell? Perhaps you are a well-known villain?" she asked with an upturn to her soft pink lips.

Rowland gave a soft laugh at the thought, "No, my lady,

I can assure you I am no villain."

"Are you here uninvited then?" Lady Louisa continued her asking genuinely intrigued by the mysterious man.

“I am nearly sure that I was invited,” he said slowly. “Are you saying you don’t know who I am?” He added a little surprised.

“I am sorry to say that I don’t. But I am not from this area. I don’t mean to offend by my lack of knowledge.”

“I am not offended at all. In fact, I find it very refreshing.”

“Does that mean you don’t plan to tell me your name?” Lady Louisa asked while her fingered itched to know this man’s identity.

“No, I don’t think I will,” he said with a slightly wide sparkling grin.

“But perhaps you would share yours with me, as I must have missed your introduction when the ball began.”

Lady Louisa seemed to consider this a few moments before turning away from him to flit over the bookshelf closest to her. She didn’t want to explain that she had arrived late or worse why she had been so late.

“I can’t see why I should tell you mine when you won’t tell me yours,” she said as her fingers ran along the spines of the books.

“I can’t say that is unfair, though I don’t like it. Perhaps I can guess your identity then,” he said excitedly with the idea of it.

She looked back at him, and Rowland was sure his heart caught in his throat as her clear blue eyes sized him up.

“Alright, I will allow you five questions and one guess,” she said with a sly smile.

She was rather enjoying this game.

He nodded his masked face in agreement before taking a hand to his chin as he rubbed it in thought.

"I would guess by the fine quality of your dress, you are a lady?" he asked and stated all at the same time.

"That is true. My father was a Lord with a seat in the House of Lords," Lady Louisa encouraged knowing that in this crowd that would not limit his options by much.

"Was?" he asked.

"He passed away a few years back," she said sullenly.

"I'm so sorry," he said taking a step closer to her and closing the gap. Though she could scarcely make out his eyes behind such a large mask, she heard the sincerity in his voice and thanked him for it.

"That's two questions down," Lady Louisa said wanting to move on from the subject of her father's passing.

"That hardly counts," the Duke retorted. "It was more like a follow-up question."

"Unfortunately, you don't get to make the rules. I do. I say it counts as two," Lady Louisa said feeling braver in the anonymity.

"Alright then," he said rubbing his chin again, "then I suppose I will have to be more careful with my speech. Let me think, three questions left," he added to himself.

Rowland was rather enjoying this litter diverting game and found this mysterious woman quite perplexing.

"Are you here tonight with family?"

Lady Louisa thought over the question. She technically had been invited along with her aunt's family, but then they had no idea that she was present at the ball.

"That's actually a hard one. I would have to say yes and no."

“Yes and no!” The Duke retorted with a laugh. “I have a feeling you are being very difficult on purpose.”

“I don’t mean to be, honest. I guess I will say that I was invited with family members but came on my own.” “A brave maiden to come to such a place on such a night alone,” he said.

He thought over the guest again in his head. He was sure he had not greeted a single lady into his house.

“Are you asking me if I am brave?” Lady Louisa teased with a playful smile.

She took a couple more steps in the direction of the books turning her attention back to them when he quickly shook his head no in fear of giving away another question.

It rather felt more like a game of cat and mouse. Both seemed to take steps from time to time first farther away from each other than closer together, and now again Lady Louisa put space between them.

“I can certainly already deduce you are a brave lady. The fact that you didn’t immediately leave the room, and that you came alone tells me that. You must be quite bold and outspoken in life.”

Lady Louisa couldn’t help but laugh. Nothing could have been further from the truth in describing her. The gentleman watched her laugh with merriment in his own masked face.

“I take it this is not a true statement then? Yes, that is my next question,” he asked when Lady Louisa questioned him with her own blue eyes before answering.

“As a fourth question, you are correct in that I am not a very outspoken lady normally.”

“Yet you have a change tonight. You seem quite radiant in spunk and defiance as you continue to float away from me in this very room,”

the Duke said putting words to the frustration he felt.

He was sure if he got close enough he would recognize her, but she always seemed to stay aloft. He pondered his last question carefully in dire need to know this woman now more than ever.

“So you are a lady normally reserved, but quite taken alive with anonymity. I am sure from your manners and speech you were taken to the finest schools in London.”

“Is that all you know so far?” Lady Louisa teased.

“You also have a fondness for Percy Bysshe Shelley,” Rowland stated boldly. The lady looked back at him surprised he said this.

“I have watched you run your hand along each shelf but only when it fell upon a book by Shelley did you stop and let your fingers walk the binding.”

She looked down shyly. She couldn’t believe she had done so without even realizing it herself.

“Let me see if I can remember this correctly,” he said softly while he thought. “the sunlight claps the earth, and the moonbeams kiss the sea: what are these kissings worth, if though kiss not me?”

Lady Louisa looked down at the ground shyly. She was surprised by his ability to quote Shelley and also the brazen choice he made.

“Did I get it right?” he asked almost thinking to himself.

“Yes,” Lady Louisa replied. “Love’s Philosophy. It is actually one of my favorites.”

He widened into a large smile at her words. He took two more steps closer, and this time she didn’t take any away. They were now standing so close that the nose of his mask could almost brush against the top of her head. She would have to look up to see into his eyes but

she couldn't bring herself to do so.

"Tell me your name," he whispered. "I fear I will never guess it and shall not survive the night without knowing it."

"I hardly see how I could now," she said with a playful smile. "I find myself alone in a closed room with a man I know nothing of spouting romantic poetry to me. I fear it is best we never exchange names after such an intimate encounter that could ruin us both if parties were made known."

"Perhaps you are right. We are in quite a compromising situation. If you told me your name, I suppose I would have to do the honorable thing."

There was silence between them for a few moments.

"I don't know that I would mind that terribly," Rowland finally said. He was satisfied to see her shocked face raise up to meet his.

Rowland bore deep into the blue eyes that looked back at him willing some recognition, but none came.

"I should go," Lady Louisa said utterly embarrassed now.

She had experienced and participated in more flirtation than she had ever done before in all her seasons combined.

"May I ask my last question first before you leave?"

"Alright, after all, you do have one left," Lady Louisa said hoping the playful banter might remove the heavy weight that seemed to tie them together.

"Would you do me the honor of a dance?"

Lady Louisa hesitated and looked towards the door she had entered.

“I don’t suggest we walk out of this room together. You can exit this way,” he motioned to the door behind him. “There will be fewer people out in the hall. I will take the door leading back into the ballroom. We could meet in there, let's say by the punch table for the next set?”

Lady Louisa considered this. She did have a desire to know this charismatic, tall, angular man as well.

“Alright,” she finally said softly. She stepped around him and made way to the door leading out of the room. She hesitated for just a moment and looked back.

“See you very soon then?” Rowland asked of the mysterious enchantress.

She nodded once and then slipped out of the door.

Lady Louisa stood in the fairly empty hall for just a few moments. No one had noticed her exit from the room. She was sure if she was the one to open the other door and enter the ballroom all eyes would fall on her.

Why would he not care that entering the ballroom after she left the same door would already cause suspicion from any of the matrons in the room? Those ladies never missed a thing. Perhaps men did not realize things like that.

Lady Louisa straightened out her skirts and touched her hair to make sure it was still perfectly in place as Bess had done. She had never experienced anything like that in her life and rather felt like she was waking from a dream.

Never had a gentleman shown any interest in the plain wallflower that was Lady Louisa. Perhaps if she had attended a masquerade ball sooner in life, she would have found this more daring side of herself.

Taking steadying breaths, she made her way down the hall and back towards the sounds of voices and music in the magnificent ballroom. She was already feeling the butterflies of anticipation at meeting the man again.

He would be easy to spot. He was likely to be the only one in such a full mask. Though death masks with their long pointed noses were a popular masculine choice for men, even if someone wore the same one as he did, she would still be able to easily spot that tall frame and square chin.

She entered the room and scanned it for just a second. She wanted to make sure she could see her aunt and cousins and stay far away from them for the dance. She finally laid eyes on the large array of peacock feathers.

However, her attention was drawn to the table of punch almost immediately. There he was standing, waiting for her arrival. She couldn't help but notice several people watching him and whispering. Had it been noticed her going in and his coming out of that door.

She hesitated to go to him, though her body protested the inaction. It was visibly obvious that people were taking notice of him. Then she watched as an elderly gentleman walked up to him and spoke in a quick, quiet tone.

Lady Louisa recognized the man at once as Mr.

Vaughan. Then the masked man put a reassuring hand on Mr. Vaughan's shoulder and seemed to laugh off his words. Lady Louisa was beginning to see a very close familiarity between the two that made her stomach turn.

With each passing second, the puzzle pieces were coming together. She had seen that tall frame before, heard that deep luxurious voice. What seemed to seal the deal for her was when the gentleman turned to speak to one introduced to him by Mr. Vaughan. He had long hair that seemed to shine black ebony in the light tied back with a simple ribbon.

She was sure. The mysterious man she had just spent the last half hour flirting with was none other than the Duke of Rowland. She couldn't believe herself. How had she not seen it before? With every motion and mannerism, he screamed recognition.

She started to panic and backed out of the room. In the process, she accidentally backed into someone. A loud yelp resounded that caught the attention of those around them. Lady Louisa turned and apologized profusely to the young lady that she had trampled on.

Turning back around, she saw the Duke too had caught the act, and when her eyes reached his face, he smiled in satisfaction. She shook her head in dread.

Instantly the smile that had spread on his face faltered. He took a few steps towards her, seeming to know that she was about to run.

Run she did. She turned on her heels and as quick as she could she removed herself from the room. It was not an easy task for a lady with so many skirts to consider. She was sure that the Duke would overtake her flee. She would not look back, however.

She couldn't bear to let the Duke know who she actually was. He would be so appalled to know. She was sure she should have felt shocked at the knowledge as well.

Instead, she was sure her heart was breaking with each step that she took. This had been the first and only time in her life she could honestly say that she felt the excitement of budding romance and now she was going to run from it.

She was almost to the front door when she heard the pursuing steps behind her. She couldn't stop, however. Luckily a man was at the door and opened it for her.

Only once did she hear the Duke call out, "Wait!" before she was out in the clear air of the night.

She didn't stop there either. She had assured Mr. Johnson she would take the carriage home with her aunt not wanting to make him wait with the cart all night. Now she was regretting that decision.

She stepped quickly down the stone steps and turned sharp right to hid behind the line of bushes on the side. She had just made it behind the rose shrubs when a second figure burst from the doors.

The Duke of Rowland removed his mask to see into the night clearer. He took a few steps down the stairs and looked over to the stables of

waiting carriages. Perhaps he would see her vehicle go by and stop her.

He could see his own air in the chill of the night as it came in and out in short bursts. Evidently, the lady had realized who he was when she entered the ballroom. The recognition read all over her face. Why had that made her run?

For the first time in his life, he had met someone that brought such a turmoil of emotions and simultaneously she was the only one to run away from him.

He waited on the steps a few moments longer sure that she couldn't have gone too far. Inevitably she would appear at any moment. But it never happened.

"Rowland," a deep husky voice called from behind him. Rowland turned to see his uncle in the doorway. "First you disappear for almost an hour. Then right in the middle of Lady Ludlow's words, you bolt from the ballroom. What is going on?"

"I saw someone," Rowland responded still half dazed by it all.

"Someone? What do you mean someone?"

"Not just someone, Uncle James. The someone. I believe I have found her!" Rowland said gripping his uncle by both shoulders.

"You are acting quite mad, tonight," Mr. Vaughan said, put off by the outburst.

"I'm trying to tell you, Uncle. I have found her. The girl I am destined to marry."

"Well, then where is she?"

"She left."

“Left?”

“Yes. She ran.”

“Why would she run?” Mr. Vaughan asked skeptically. “I don’t know,” Rowland said in a voice that drifted off.

“Well, what is her name. Perhaps she got scared or had to leave. We can certainly call on her on the morrow,” Mr. Vaughan said happily seeing this lovesick look in his nephew's eyes.

“I don’t know,” Rowland repeated. He turned to his uncle and looked him straight on. “She never told me her name.”

“You are talking nonsense, nephew. Come inside. There is a hall full of eligible ladies more than willing to run towards you, not away.”

Mr. Vaughan shook his head at his nephews confusing actions. With an arm around Rowland's shoulders, he eased him to return to the house.

“She was the one, I am sure of it,” Rowland whispered before donning his mask back on and returning inside with his uncle.

Lady Louisa waited hidden behind the shrubbery until she was sure that the Duke was gone. She had heard every word of that conversation. Undoubtedly the man was mistaken she thought as she unclasped her own mouth. She had feared that her own breath could give her hiding spot away. Timidly she stepped from behind the bushes checking to see that she was indeed alone at the front of the house.

With little word or fanfare, she began the walk back to her own residence. In the beginning, she turned several times upon hearing sounds. She so feared that the Duke might reappear and discover her true identity.

Soon she turned a bend blocking her view from the house, and in the

still darkness, she concentrated hard on the ground before her. There was little moonlight to guide her path.

Luckily she had already made this walk several times when she came to learn at the side of Mrs. Vance. Even still there was the need to remove her mask which obscured her own view a bit.

She puzzled as she walked briskly in the chilled air how she didn't realize it was the Duke from the moment she had slipped into the office. It was so obvious now that she knew his identity.

More puzzling was the fact that he had confused her with a beautiful enchantress and not the plain lady that he greatly disliked. She reminded herself that she had exceedingly disliked him as well.

How that had changed when she spoke with him with no pre-knowledge of his character. In fact, she had quite fallen for him at that moment. It was a fleeting emotion; she tried to remind herself. Nothing more than a mistake.

It also didn't need to be mentioned that her sole purpose of coming to the country was to make amends with her aunts. Though she had not been successful in this task, she strongly doubted that informing the Duke that she was the woman he had just vowed to wed would bode well with either Lady Hendrickson or Miss Elisabeth.

For that reason alone she was determined to keep her identity this night a secret from the Duke. Certainly, the emotion would be fleeting for him as well. No doubt he already found interest in another upon returning to the party.

No, there would be no reason to inform the Duke that she was the woman in the green dress when it would only cause more strife and turmoil between her family and her aunts. Instead, she would return to Mentheith House and pretend like the encounter never occurred.

She would swear Bess and Mr. Johnson to silence. They would never speak of her absence from the house this night if she asked them not

to. She would continue the plan she had made before the debacle with the Duke ever occurred. Within a week's time, she would return to London and leave every memory of this place behind her.

Lady Louisa retired to bed long before the other ladies of the house returned from the ball. Consequentially, she also rose much earlier than the others. She rather enjoyed the peaceful breakfast she had alone in the morning room and then settled herself in the drawing room to do some mending while she waited for the rest of her relations to waken.

Lady Louisa had already begun to make her plans to return to London that very morning. First, she sent a letter to her mother informing the Dowager Countess that she would be coming home shortly.

Next, she asked Mr. Johnson to procure coach times so as to ascertain her earliest departure. She would have been quite fine if she could have left that very morning so much was she dreading seeing her aunt and Miss Elisabeth again.

Not only did Lady Louisa still feel a great amount of amenity towards them for the ridiculously rude behavior before the ball, but she also had no desire to hear the two talk incessantly of the night.

Lady Louisa was still in the process of reconciling what had occurred to her at the ball and make sense of the swirl of emotion it had caused within herself.

Unfortunately leaving before the rest of the house was even awake was not something that Lady Louisa could do. For starts, it would take much more time to prepare for such a trip. Secondly, though she didn't feel much gravitate towards her aunt as host, Lady Louisa's upbringing would not allow her to leave without a proper goodbye to her hostess.

So it was that by mid-afternoon the rest of the household was fully awake and breakfasted. Even at such a late hour of the day, all three were still quite groggy from the night's adventure. It was one of the quietest afternoons that Lady Louisa had ever experienced in Mentheith House.

"I want to know who this supposed mystery woman is that everyone kept gabbing on about last night," Lady Hendrickson said after a time.

Lady Louisa was just about to excuse herself from the group and see to the needs of the garden; she decided against it when the conversation turned to the ball and unknown guest.

"Someone of little consequence if you ask me," Miss Elisabeth said with a flick of her hand.

"I would not be so quick to brush the event off," Lady Hendrickson scolded. "It is rumored that the Duke was quite taken by her. He even chased her out the door." "Chased is my point, Mother. Whatever lady is mental enough to run from the Duke of Rowland is not worth the discussion."

"Colonel Jasper said that the Duke spoke of nothing else but finding her identity the rest of the night," Miss Mary chimed in. "He even told me that the Duke has vowed to marry the lady when he learns of her name."

"I can't believe such things. And why would Colonel tell you anyway?" Miss Elisabeth said in an accusatory fashion.

Miss Mary's gaze fell immediately to her hands in her lap.

"Don't be so cross with your sister," Lady Hendrickson scolded her daughter.

It brought a shocked look from every member of the room.

"She did us a great service last night," Lady

Hendrickson continued. "She kept the attention of the Colonel since Louisa was sadly not able to attend," she said without even looking in Lady Louisa's direction. "She had even secured the promise of a family dinner with the Duke and his house guest here at Mentheith House."

"How wonderfully exciting for you all," Lady Louisa said. "It sounds like the night was a most eventful one."

"I wish you could have seen it," Miss Mary said gaining back some of her will to talk. "The house just looked marvelous. The dancing was divine too. When the Duke ran out after that lady," she trialed off. "I dare say it was the most romantic thing I have ever seen," she finished.

"Hardly," Miss Elisabeth scoffed though softer now with her mother's scolding. "I bet you anything it was simply an unenvied guest, and the Duke was chasing her off."

Even Lady Hendrickson gave her daughter a look that said she highly doubted it.

"Frankly, my dear," Lady Hendrickson said with her chin in the air, "I think you are underestimating the problem this little mystery can cause us. Up until last night, it was almost clear that he was nearly about to propose. Now his mind has seemed to travel elsewhere."

"What am I to do about that?" Miss Elisabeth said in a whine.

"It's really simple, my dear," Lady Hendrickson replied. "You simply must remind him that the real one in front of him is far superior to a fantasy girl that he concocts in his head."

"Concocted? Mother, you saw him just as the rest of us did," Miss Mary chimed in.

"Yes we all saw the rather unremarkable thing," Lady Hendrickson replied with a roll of her eyes. Clearly, she was back to the status quo of finding her youngest daughter a nuisance. "He has clearly

fantasized her beyond the person, why else would he have chased after her. It was no doubt the mystery of a lady without a name or clear face for that matter. He will not go to great lengths to immortalize her in such a way.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she was nothing more than a silly servant in her mistress dress. Why else would the girl run upon the threat of discovery? The truth of the matter will come out in the end, it always doesn’t,” Lady Hendrickson continued. “Until then you must be present and remind the Duke that no fantastical creature of his own making can compare to you. Then when the lady is discovered, he will not only realize she was nothing compared to the one in his head, but also holds not a candles flame to you,” the lady finally finished.

Lady Louisa felt very contradicted by her aunt’s words. Though she felt comfort in her aunt’s opinion that the Duke was surely making more out of the encounter than there really was; she also was a little disappointed to hear those words spoken out loud.

“It shall be our new goal,” Lady Hendrickson said with an air of importance, “that we discover the identity first.

If it is another invited guest, who turned and fled then we must befriend and encourage the discouraging feelings within her. If it is a servant or other unworthy creature, we will expose her as such to the Duke.”

“In the meantime, Lady Louisa can use her connections to Colonel Jasper to tell us of the Duke’s decisions on the matter,” Lady Hendrickson said without so much as a look in Lady Louisa’s direction.

Miss Mary and Lady Louisa did exchange glances from the statement. It was apparent that Miss Mary was still not ready for her mother to know the truth about where Colonel Jasper’s affections actually lied.

“Also, since you go into town all the time and speak with the servants and thelike, you can find out what others are saying about this

woman,” Miss Elisabeth said with a backhanded wave in Lady Louisa’s direction.

“Are you referring to my time spent with the sick and injured. If you remember correctly, you asked me to stop, and I have already given my apologies to Mrs. Vance and several of those I tended.”

“Well then you will just go and tell Mrs. Vance that you changed your mind,” Lady Hendrickson said exasperated that Lady Louisa didn’t see that point clearly.

“I would be more than happy to take up my patience as I have already learned so much about the practice, but unfortunately I can’t see how that will be possible.”

“Oh, why ever not?” Lady Hendrickson retorted as she flicked her fan irritated.

“I fear that my mother has grown quite lonely in my absence and have begun the process of procuring transpiration home. I wanted to tell you as much this morning. I worry that my presence here is too much of a burden and, though I am grateful for your hospitably, wish to rid you of it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! The one time you could actually be of use, and of course you wish to leave,” Lady Hendrickson said to the room on the whole.

Lady Louisa bit back her tongue. She had only called herself a burden out of humble politeness. It was rather annoying for her aunt to claim that up until this point she had served no purpose.

“I do beg your pardon, Lady Hendrickson, but I have tried to be as much use as possible these last several weeks,” Lady Louisa said softly. She felt rather miserable at that moment.

“If you truly wish to be a help,” Lady Hendrickson retorted with a shake of her jowls, “then you will stay and do as I ask. Certainly, your

mother is capable of sparing you longer. After all, you were planned to stay through summer. Is it really so much to ask for you to keep your word?"

Lady Louisa did hate how her aunt always seemed to have ways of manipulating words to get her desired outcome. She wouldn't be able to deny her aunt now after speaking in such a way.

"If you find my presence a benefit," Lady Louisa said rather reluctantly, "then I shall be happy to stay."

The conversation continued with more speculation and plans to ascertain the identity of the mystery woman. Lady Louisa feared her face might give her away at any moment, so she politely excused herself to attend to the garden before the sunset.

Not long after Lady Louisa began to trim, weed, and collect ready specimens for drying, Miss Mary joined her.

"I know Mother can be unusually difficult to live with,"

Miss Mary said as she came to take her place at Lady Louisa's side. "But I do hope you will stay. I know this sounds horribly selfish of me, but without you here, I don't know that I will find a way to see the Colonel much."

Lady Louisa thought the matter over. She wondered if perhaps she had been the selfish one. After all, hadn't she hoped to bring the Colonel and Miss Mary together. Now she had chosen to leave for her own pride and had thrown any help that she had promised to Miss Mary aside.

"I don't think it is selfish of you at all," Lady Louisa said to her squeezing her hand. "I know the two of you will be very happy together. Any way I can help to make that a possibility I will be happy to do so."

"But what of your own mother? I feel so awful to ask you to stay away

from her if she truly is lonely.”

Lady Louisa laughed at the thought. Even with her in the country and Colton far away in the Colonies, there was no chance of her mother being lonely. She had a vast array of people and projects to keep her quite occupied.

“I promise that Mother is more than entertained. I only said that by way of excuse. I rather didn’t want to give Lady Hendrickson another chance to pour sherry down my dress.”

“Oh, that was so awful,” Miss Mary responded. “I was so shocked; I had no words to say. I couldn’t believe even she would stoop to that level. All that Mother cared about was one less titled lady at the ball that night. I find her scheming so exhausting at times.”

“Yes, she does seem quite duplicitous when it comes to my presence. I am sure that most days she would rather not have my company and then when I suggest leaving she insist on me staying.”

Lady Louisa shook her head wondering if she would ever truly understand her aunt and her motives.

“It’s simply this,” Miss Mary said brushing her skirts with a little more force than necessary. “If one has uses of her, she is willing to allow one's presence. However, if one should ever disagree with her, or heaven forbid, work against her prerogative, she can be quite vindictive.”

Lady Louisa had a feeling that Mary was speaking more of her own relationship with Lady Hendrickson. She was sure that it couldn’t have been an easy thing for Miss Mary to grow up under such a demanding and forceful mother.

Lady Louisa might have suffered under her aunt's displeasure these last several weeks, but Miss Mary had seemed to her whole life. It was no wonder that Miss Mary more often than not chose to keep her thoughts to herself than share with a mother who always seemed to

disapprove.

Lady Louisa was willing to stay as long as it would take for the sake of Miss Mary. If she could somehow help her aunt to see the good character in Colonel Jasper and accept him as a prospect for her younger daughter, Lady Louisa could at least feel she had helped in accomplishing something beyond the darning of stockings and fixing of hems.

A week after the ball and Rowland was still no closer to discovering the identity of his lady in green, and he had come to name her.

Twice he had forced his uncle, and Jasper scroll through the list of invited and account for each one's where about during the time in question. Rowland had now reduced his hunt to a small list of five possibilities. Each one of these ladies had not been seen by any three of the gentleman as best as they could remember, had the possibility of matching the limited description, and were titled.

"Perhaps it is time to give up the search," Mr. Vaughan said as he stood to look out the study widows and soak in some sunshine. "We have been at this for days. Would it not be better to just forget her altogether?"

"Your uncle does have a point," Jasper also spoke up. "If the lady in green wanted to be found, we would have found her by now. It was no secret by the end of the night that you had been taken by her."

"I won't give up until I find her," Rowland said with resolve. "How can you ask any less of me. She is the one, the one that you, Uncle, insisted I find upon returning to England."

"I didn't insist on you finding the one, just a one, anyone in fact," he said with a smile of pride at his ingenious play on words.

"Yes, and what happened to picking the easiest option so as to return to the Indies?" Jasper asked with a raised brow. He had always contradicted Rowland's schemes from the beginning.

“That was before I met her. Now everything has changed. How can one settled for a dimly lit cage when he was allowed to run free in the sun?”

Colonel Jasper smiled in a knowing fashion. He had suspected something like this would eventually happen to his friend. Jasper was a little disappointed that it was with the woman he had thought would be a good match for Rowland, but Jasper was just glad that he had found someone to be passionate about.

“You sound quite ridiculous when you speak like that,” Mr. Vaughan said turning back to his nephew.

No amount of lightning striking would ever be enough to prove to the older gentleman that finding interest in the opposite sex was more than just a fleeting moment.

He walked back over to the desk and held up the list of names for inspection again.

“If you would pick but one name on this list, I can assure you, Rowland; you would find sufficient happiness for your needs.”

“I don’t want just sufficient for my needs anymore. Uncle, I want to find her.”

“Well, I am finding that possibility more and more unlikely as the days pass, my dear nephew. Choose one or let us be done with this,” Mr. Vaughan added smacking the paper.

“I can’t do that. I cannot find solace until I know who the lady in green is. She has quite bewitched me,” Rowland added with a lopsided smile as he looked at the names. For all he knew, he was staring at the written manifestation of his future wife.

“Clearly she has bewitched you,” Mr. Vaughan said with a scoff before excusing himself from the room.

“I’m sure you find me just as maddening as Uncle James,” Rowland said to his friend after Mr. Vaughan left the room.

“I do,” Jasper stated simply. “But maddening is far better than indifferent in my opinion.”

Rowland’s uncle continued to encourage the Duke to focus on something real and tangible. Instead, Rowland spent many sleepless nights replaying the encounter in his head. He was sure that if he did it enough time, he would remember something missed. Some kind of a clue that would give the lady’s identity away.

Sadly, this was not the case. Instead he became more and more frustrated as the memory seemed to slip between his fingers.

“Lady Hendrickson has invited us over for a dinner party,” Mr. Vaughan said over dinner two weeks after the ball.

Rowland waved off the idea indifferently.

“It might be a good idea. If nothing else, it would be worth getting you away from Bassen Park for the night.

You are beginning to turn into a recluse, dear nephew,” Mr. Vaughan added.

“And how would spending the night listening to Miss Hendrickson drool on about her accomplishments improve my standing in society?”

“Well, I am sure we will not be the only ones to attend a dinner party. Even a small gathering will have a few other guests. The society might brighten your mood some, you have been very cross as of late. There are also the other ladies of the house to consider.”

“Who, Lady Louisa who despises me, or Miss Mary who has eyes set on another?” Rowland said in reference to the Colonel who was not present that night for dinner. “Where is Jasper?”

"I believe Lady Louisa and Miss Mary went to town to tend to some of Mrs. Vance's business. Colonel Jasper offered to be their transportation. Those two have really taken quite a liking to the other," Mr. Vaughan said in a whimsical tone that was not normal for him.

It was enough to catch Rowland's attention from his meal.

"I suppose it would be a kind thing to do for Jasper.

After all, it would give him another chance to win over Lady Hendrickson. The woman seems so against Jasper, and I can't fathom why."

"I agree that Jasper is a gentleman of great character. He is also a commissioned officer," Mr. Vaughan countered.

"He has already informed me of his plans to sell his commission and settled down," Rowland countered. "Surely that isn't Lady Hendrickson's only dispute, though. It would be a ridiculous thing to deny two people in love simply because his means of support involved moving away from one's home. She has some other objections to him, though I don't know what they could be."

"Perhaps she doesn't relish the fact of the youngest marrying before the elder," Mr. Vaughan said giving his nephew a look that said far more than his words.

"I won't even dignify that innuendo with a response," Rowland said trying his best to sound irritated but in fact knowing that his uncle was only teasing.

"No," Rowland said with a heavy sigh, "as much as I would rather not, I see we must go. I will send my acceptance with the morning post. I am willing to suffer the night at the hand of Miss Elisabeth's insufferable conversation, and Lady Louisa's disdain, but only because Jasper is such a good friend."

Mr. Vaughan nodded his approval at his nephew.

“And just think,” he added after a moment of silence, “your lady in green may very well be a guest as well. This could be the moment you have been searching for all these weeks.”

Rowland rolled his eyes inwardly at his uncle’s teasing. He had, in fact, created his own method of finding the girl out.

He had still in his hand the list of ladies from the three counties that were being considered as the lady in green. Rowland had already acquired invitations to two of the five estates and would not find many problems in securing the last three.

He would visit with each lady and her family. He was sure if he could but speak with the lady in green once more he would know in an instant it was her. A simple visit to each house was all he was sure he would need to exclude ladies from the list one by one until the lady he desired was found.

It was worth it to Rowland to suffer through one unenjoyable night at the Hendrickson’s home if afterward, he was able to find the lady in green.

Rowland had never considered in one moment his life could change so much. Perhaps it was as Jasper said, and just the fact that the lady ran from him, that he was so obsessed with finding her. Deep down he knew that there was more to it than that.

There was something about that lady that was so familiar, almost a tangible memory of knowing her before that night. He was sure that his feelings for the lady was not just merely a manifestation of desiring something unknown. She was known to him on some level.

The warmth of summer was beginning to hit its high point, and Rowland feared if he didn’t find the lady in green by the end of the year she would slip from his grasp forever.

Lady Louisa was rather reluctant to join the small dinner party this evening. Though there would be no proper excuse for her not to at least show face when it was, after all, held in her own aunt's residence.

Along with the Lady and Lord Hartford, there was also their daughter Lady Julianna who was the same age and very good friends with Miss Elisabeth. Lady Louisa had made the acquaintance of Lady Julianna on a few occasions amid her many seasons with the ton.

She had no opinion of the lady good or bad but rather found her of the same opinion of Miss Elisabeth when in her presence. It was quite off-putting to have two Miss Elisabeth's in the same room.

Lady Louisa was happy to hear that Mr. Henderson, the solicitor her brother employed, had also accepted an invitation to the dinner. It seemed that Lady Hendrickson husband had also used his services.

Lady Louisa's biggest fear, and her aunt's greatest satisfaction was that the Duke had also accepted the invitation to dine. He was, of course, the target of the party.

Lady Louisa was still filled with uncertainty over the encounter with the Duke at the ball. She was conflicted by the fact that her excitement that night had not yet left her as she had hoped it would.

In fact, quite the contrary dispute her mental desire not to be, she was rather nervous about seeing the Duke again. It was more than for the fact that he might recognize her for the lady in green. She had an even greater fear that he would and recoil at the notion in front of

everyone.

But before she knew it the night in question was upon her and guests were beginning to arrive. Lady Louisa hoped that if she did her part to avoid the Duke, he was sure to do the same. In that way, she would preserve her secret.

She chose to spend the time in the drawing room before the meal in the company of Mr. Henderson. He happily told her tale after tale of his own time in Virginia and what her brother must be experiencing right at that moment.

Soon his fantastical tales were so wondrous it caught the attention of the majority of the group, including the Duke's small trio.

"You say this all happened in the Colonies?" Rowland asked entranced by the tales of adventure and dangerous savages.

"Yes, your grace. I was lucky enough to travel there several times on behalf of the Earl of Gilchrist," Mr. Henderson informed him. "He has property in Virginia. I was just giving Lady Louisa a rendition of some of the adventures since her brother is currently there with his wife."

"Yes, Lady Louisa did mention something about that to me once," Rowland said looking over to Lady Louisa. "It did seem such a wonderful adventure."

"I would say it is, Your Grace. Are you one for adventuring then?" Mr. Henderson responded.

"I have been in the past. I spent most of my youthful years in the West Indies and Asia."

"Well, you must share some of your own tales then, Your Grace. Lady Louisa and I were just talking on her own hankering for an adventure," Mr. Henderson said tipping a glass in Lady Louisa's direction.

“Is that true?” The Duke asked skeptically of Lady Louisa. It was his understanding that up until recently she had never even left the city.

“Well,” Lady Louisa said shyly. “I don’t know if I will manage traveling the world as you have, Your Grace. I am sure you can imagine things are not quite as easy for the female sex when it comes to these things. I wouldn’t mind seeing more of the world if I could make that a possibility. Perhaps I will visit my brother in the Americas if they continue their stay in the land. Though Mr. Henderson has frightened me off some with talk of savages,” Lady Louisa added with a joking smile.

“You surprise me, Lady Louisa,” the Duke said. “I would have never considered you to do something as unconventional as crossing the Atlantic on your own.”

“Well, have no fear, I don’t think my mother would ever allow me to do so. It is just wishful thinking I suppose. I believe my time away from home, if nothing else, had encouraged more independence and bravery for me. Something I don’t think I ever would have found in myself otherwise.”

“Funny, I would never consider independence and admirable quality for a lady,” Miss Elisabeth chimed into the conversation.

Up until this point she had been rather irritated to have been forced to listen to Mr. Henderson’s incessant chatter but now that the Duke found interest in it, she also did. Of course, she would never pass an opportunity to shine Lady Louisa negatively.

“On the contrary,” Colonel responded taking up Lady Louisa’s cause. “I rather wish we let women have more independence. To see the improvements that Lady Louisa has made in the lives of so many here as she has made her regular marches alone into town only testifies to that fact. If we were to consider it more acceptable, I believe a great many ladies would have more means to help and support so many more in need.”

Lady Louisa blushed and looked away at the Colonel's compliment.

"I couldn't agree more," the Duke concurred. "I am sure the world would be a better place if we gave women a little more freedom to make it so."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Lady Louisa said surprised at his honest remarks to her benefit.

He shrugged her off.

"It is only my personal opinion on the matter. I was once advised to do so, even if it was not the consensus. I believe the words were that it is better to be yourself than to be a falsehood to please others," he countered with a playful grin.

Lady Louisa immediately recognized it as the same playful, flirtatious smile from the night at the masquerade. She did her best to hid this knowledge though she felt it was written on her face.

"It is a shame, that she will be leaving us soon," Miss Elisabeth announced.

"Who is?" Colonel Jasper said confused.

"Why, Lady Louisa of course," Miss Elisabeth said in an innocent tone that was genuinely unbecoming of her.

Lady Louisa felt all eyes of the group fall on her and she had nothing to say. Had her aunt not just insist that she stay. On top of this, she had also just promised to do so to Miss Mary. Now here was Miss Elisabeth announcing the contradiction to her decision.

"I was meant to stay the whole of the season," Lady Louisa started, "but I feared my mother may have started to grow lonely in London with both my brother and me gone."

"But you will not leave so soon? I feel as if you have only arrived,"

Colonel Jasper said.

This conversation was not going at all as Miss Elisabeth had wanted. Instead, every everyone resolving in her departure and forgetting her altogether, they all seemed to calmer around Lady Louisa and insisted she stay.

Miss. Elisabeth reminded herself that this was the exact reason why she always tried to play out every move on the chessboard of life before playing it. This sporadic action had only hurt her own cause.

“My mother has assured me she is quite fine in my absence,” Lady Louisa said with a shy smile. “I had rather hoped to stay the whole seasons through to get a better understanding on how to tend the medicinal garden from Mrs. Vance. Mary and I have already learned so much from her, but there seems to be so much we don’t know yet,” Lady Louisa assured.

“Yes, Miss Mary constantly speaks of your time with

Mrs. Vance and in the medicinal garden,” Colonel Jasper said. “It sounds like the education is a great enjoyment to the both of you.”

He looked over at Miss Mary who was listening intently to something that Lord Hartford was saying. He had the soft glow in his eyes of someone greatly in love. It was the first time ever that Miss Elisabeth realized it. Her mouth visibly dropped at the sight.

For the rest of the conversation until dinner was announced Miss Elisabeth kept a steady glaring look at Colonel Jasper. Though the Colonel was either unaware or chose not to make notice of it, Lady Louisa was all too aware of the unhappy looks.

During the dinner Lady Louisa found herself seated between Lady Hartford and Lady Julianna. It wasn’t a terrible situation to be as they both kept up steady pleasantries of conversation.

In fact, Lady Louisa was rather surprised at how successful the night

had gone thus far. Even her aunt seemed to be enjoying herself at the head of the table. She always could seem to find some bit of information to tell the Duke on behalf of her daughters who were seated down at the far in, as propriety necessitated.

Lady Louisa did have to admit that she did feel a little sorry for the Duke. She was sure she had judged him too harshly at the first. Though it was clear he had little interest in the abilities of Miss Elisabeth in painting fans, he did politely listen and even asked questioned when it was appropriate.

He was ever the proper Duke, and for once Lady Louisa didn't see this to his detriment. After all, he had not chosen this role in life anymore than a blacksmith's son might. He had taken on his responsibility, however, and was doing it with the respect that the titled deserved.

Lady Louisa had to admit that she did owe him an apology for her cross words at their first few meetings. Though she could admit to herself that it probably was just as much his fault for their quarrelling as hers, she knew she was the one who would owe him the recompense for her words.

For this reason, once the meal was finished, Lady Louisa hoped to seek the Duke out for a private conversation. A very private conversation would not be possible, but she looked for a moment when she could perhaps speak with him with no one else near.

Until the moment came, she instead waited patiently by her youngest cousin's side. The Colonel had in fact been aware of Miss Elisabeth's acknowledgment of his feelings for her younger sister. He had shared the concerns with Miss Mary, who in turn had told them to Lady Louisa upon entering the drawing room after dinner.

Miss Mary did fear her sister so. She was sure that Miss Elisabeth would tell their mother right away and moreover ensure her mother was turned against the man.

"Don't worry, Mary. We will find a way to sort it all out in the end,"

Lady Louisa assured her cousin.

“I do hope so. You see, Colonel Jasper has already asked me to marry him, and I have accepted,” Miss Mary whispered.

Lady Louisa’s mouth opened for just a moment in shock.

“It happened at the ball. We both agreed to keep our engagement a secret for now. That is until he can sell his commission and procure work nearby. Only then do I feel my mother will be willing to accept him.”

“Oh, Mary,” Lady Louisa did her best to hide her excited squeal. “I am so happy for the both of you! I am at a loss for words!”

“You will keep it a secret, won't you? Only you and the Duke know of this secret.”

“Of course, it goes without saying,” Lady Louisa assured her.

“But what of my sister? If she tells Mother she suspects something, we will be found out prematurely, and all plans could be ruined.”

“I am sure we will find a way to ensure that doesn't happen,” Lady Louisa said with as much of a convincing tone as she could muster.

Lady Louisa wasn't very skilled in the art of keeping count on a gentleman through the whole of a night. It was something she was sure either Lady Hendrickson or Miss Elisabeth could give her pointers on as they seemed to have perfected that talent.

Finally, however, she saw a chance when the Duke was finally relieved from Lady Hendrickson and came to sit down next to the unused fire. Lady Louisa quickly excused herself from the party she was with and made straight to speak with him while there was still a chance.

"Your Grace," Lady Louisa said when she saw him take a seat close to the fire to inspect a fireplace screen as Lady Hendrickson had insisted.

He looked up, and Lady Louisa thought he was rather relieved it was her and not her aunt.

"Lady Louisa, have you come to inspect the delicate hyacinths that your cousin has painted so perfectly on this screen?" He said in a low voice with words dripping in sarcasm.

"No," Lady Louisa said taking the seat across from him contradictory to her words. "I can assure you I have been required to look at it many times already and know her painted floral arrangements well," she countered with the same attitude.

"I actually wanted a moment to speak with you for two reasons, Your Grace," Lady Louisa said in a soft whisper.

"And what might that be," the Duke asked leaning back in his own

chair away from the screen and looking at her with a question in his emerald eyes.

“Well, first, I suppose I owe you an apology,” Lady Louisa said with her eyes on the carpet.

“An apology?” The Duke responded with a stern tone.

“Yes, I believe I might have judged you too harshly our first few times of meeting. It was wrong of me to claim that you presented a facade to others. In honesty, I think I was a bit offended you thought so little of my sex to think we could be easily duped by a title and an agreeable disposition. I see now that you are a good man who takes his position in life very seriously.”

“I appreciate the compliment and apology,” Rowland said never excepting that speech to be what came out of Lady Louisa’s mouth. “I must admit, however, that though your words might have seemed taxing at the time, there was some truth in them.”

“I have done quite a bit of soul searching these last few weeks, and in part, I have grown and changed because of the things you said to me. I don’t need to wear a mask or put on a front to please another. It is much more worthwhile to find a companion who will accept me as I am.”

Lady Louisa sat back in her own chair and blinked a few times in wonderment. She was surprised to hear such words come from his mouth.

“I am sure I had a very little part in any growth you may have found in your own life, Your Grace,” Lady Louisa finally said in modesty. “You seem to surround yourself with very fine friends and family members who seem great supports in life.”

“This is true,” the Duke said looking over at his uncle, “Though I wouldn’t have agreed a month ago. My uncle had actually put me in quite a precarious position, and I was not very happy with it. You

see,” he continued when Lady Louisa was clearly interested in what he meant, “the only cause for me to come here and hunt for a wife, as it were, was because my uncle had quite literally threatened to remove all my funding. Though I am the Duke in title, he is still the holder of my parent's estates until he deems me fit or I reach the age of thirty.”

“Mr. Vaughan is so kind, I can’t imagine him doing such a thing,” Lady Louisa said a little surprised.

“Oh,” the Duke waved off, “I don’t think he would have ever actually gone through with it. Well, now I can safely say that, I wasn't so sure at the start of the year when he first told me. I believe he was just looking for a little incentive to get me to grow from my youthful years as a pup to the man I should become. He also felt that included not just a change of my priorities but also the necessity of a companion.”

“And you believe his methods have worked now?” Lady Louisa asked actually enjoying the time they spent together in conversation.

“Ironically, it was only after he assured me that he would cause me no ill will if I was unable to complete his requirements that I found the inspiration to change.” “You see,” he continued. “I wanted to accomplish his tasks and then go back to the way I once was. But I know see that an impossibility. One can never go back to the person you were before. You, yourself must agree with this statement. Did you not say that after your time here in the country you feel more bravery and a willingness to try new things.”

“Yes, I believe before my time here, I would not have understood what you are trying to tell me, but now having also experienced it myself, I do,” Lady Louisa agreed.

“It really hit home for me the other day,” the Duke continued. “I was reading through a book of poetry by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Do you know him?”

Lady Louisa smiled inwardly knowing where he had received such inspiration to read from this poet.

"I believe I have heard of him," she said trying to show indifference to a writer she deeply admired and respected.

"In one of his poems, he says 'Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow; Naught may endure but Mutability.'"

"It is a beautiful line," Lady Louisa agreed knowing the verses of that particular poem well.

Not only was it in Shelley's book of poems but it was also quoted by his wife in her rather controversial book *The Modern Prometheus*.

"It just spoke so greatly to me. I refuse to try and keep my way still. I feel as if I was trying to stand stagnant when in reality I was in a rushing river," Rowland continued passionately about his new awakening.

"I don't mean to chatter on about things that most likely seem quite dramatic to the hearer," the Duke said a little embarrassed that he opened up so suddenly and freely.

"I feel there is a very distinct difference from one being dramatic and one having great passion and excitement. I see you as the later, Your Grace," Lady Louisa reassured him.

He gave her a soft lopsided smile.

"But you did say there were two things you wished to speak to me about. I pray you do tell me the second for surely we will be interrupted any moment by your aunt's desire to hear my opinion on the screen," he said with a teasing tone.

Lady Louisa let her eyes drift over to where Lady Hendrickson was speaking with Lady Hartford. She too was certain any moment she would find an excuse to come over. Lady Hendrickson was giving Lady Louisa a particular look that meant she was walking on thin ice.

"I was made aware of a secret agreement between two parties and was

also told that you had foreknowledge of it,” Lady Louisa said quickly and as vaguely as possible. The Duke smiled at her.

“You don’t have to worry, I also know about Jasper’s and Miss Mary’s secret engagement,” he said in a whisper.

Lady Louisa gave a sigh of relief. For one she wasn’t sure if she would have been able to keep speaking in such abstracts. She was happy to see the Duke not doing so.

“Well, I am sure you are aware why they must keep it a secret for now.”

“Actually I am not,” the Duke replied in honesty.

“Oh,” Lady Louisa said not getting the response she expected. “I certainly don’t agree with my aunt in this matter, but I believe she has two major concerns. One Mary has assured me she in the Colonel are working on reminding and the other...” Lady Louisa wasn’t sure how to explain the second.

“What is the first?” Rowland asked skeptically.

“Well, Lady Hendrickson isn’t very happy that Colonel Jasper is a member of the militia. Though I know it to be an honorable career to have, I believe she thinks it is less than ideal for her own daughter’s living.”

“And Jasper is already in the process of selling his commission and acquiring a different employment.”

“Yes, and I fear until this matter is settled Lady Hendrickson will not feel comfortable with the marriage.”

“Well, then I will just have to see to it that I help Jasper find something that her ladyship would consider suitable. Though I would think his good character, his affection for Miss Mary, as well as his exquisite military career should be enough.”

"I do agree with you on this matter, and of course Mary does too. My aunt is just very forceful in her opinion, and I fear that she will not allow Mary to make a match unless she is satisfied with the conditions she has set."

"And what is this second condition you speak of? The one that you don't see a solution for?"

"Well, I believe it stems from my aunt's own choices in life. You see, my aunt was meant to marry an Earl, my father in fact. But she chose Mr. Hendrickson instead because she had great affection for him and barely knew my father at all. Of course, my parents would not allow such a thing, so the two eloped. In the end, my mother found companionship in the Earl intended for her older sister. My Aunt has never been settled with this situation."

"What does any of that have to do with Miss Mary and Jasper," Rowland ask not seeing the line of logic.

"I believe it is my aunt's opinion that any gentleman not of the peerage is not a viable candidate for her daughters. She fears that they will feel the same unhappiness that she felt in her life choice."

"That is preposterous! Jasper is just as worth if not more so than any gent of the ton."

"I know," Lady Louisa cooed trying to sooth his raising voice. "I agree wholeheartedly with you, as does Mary. Unfortunately, it is her mother that must be convinced."

Rowland took a moment to calm himself down. Jasper was like a brother to him and to have someone consider him less than worthy merely because he was born without a title was infuriating.

His uncle's words entered his head again. If he were to make connections to Miss Elisabeth, then things would certainly be a lot easier for Jasper. The lady in green flooded his mind again, and as much as he cared for his friend, he couldn't subject himself to a life of

Miss Elisabeth.

Certainly, there was another way that he could use his influence as a Duke to change the opinion of Lady Hendrickson.

“I have just the thing,” Rowland said suddenly. “Mrs. Vance’s late father used to oversee the whole of Bassen Property while in my absence. When he passed, Mrs. Vance did what she could to keep up with things. Of course, since my return and her need to help has increased, I have been looking to completely dedicate one person to the overseeing of the property again. Jasper would have a cottage on the property and a gentleman’s salary. Lady Hendrickson would have to accept him with such prospects,” Rowland was sure of.

Rowland didn’t wait for Lady Louisa’s answer but instead, in his excitement, looked the room over for Colonel Jasper and called him over.

Again Rowland told his friend of the plan he had concocted. Jasper hesitated for a moment as he thought the prospect over. It was a generous offer that Rowland gave him, in fact, he hesitated because it was too generous. He didn’t like the idea of taking charity. “Come on, chap. What do you think?” Rowland asked when his friend didn’t answer.

Miss Mary had joined their group also at Lady Louisa’s urging, and she now stood silently looking at the Colonel. She rather thought it was a wonderful prospect for them. She was sure that her mother could have no objections to her living in Bassen park and continuing the lifestyle she now had if not a better one between the Colonels sold commission and the generous salary suggested by the due.

It was not her decision to make, however. None the less the Colonel looked to his secret future bride for her opinion on the matter. They shared a long glance where no words were spoken, but language was exchanged.

Lady Louisa looked over at the Duke at that moment and couldn’t help

but feel a fluttering in her own stomach when their eyes met. She quickly looked away.

“I believe I would be a fool to pass up such a wonderful offer,” Jasper said with a smile after silently confirming as much with Miss Mary.

The two shook hands on the agreement. Lady Louisa wasn't sure who in their small party was more excited about the prospect such an agreement was going to make.

“We will hammer out all the details upon our return to Bassen Park,” the Duke announced beaming.

“Return,” Lady Hendrickson asked as she walked over to the group. “Do you have plans to leave, Your Grace,” she asked rather calmly, though it was apparent she didn't find the prospect a soothing thing at all.

“Yes, I will be visiting with friends for a short time. First, we will go to Lord and Lady Filtons and then spend some time with the Baron of Chesterland and his family.”

Again Miss Mary's eyes met the Colonel as it seemed it was also news to her that he would be leaving the area for a time. He would have rather explained himself at that moment but was unable to find a reason to do so in Lady Hendrickson's presence without causing more suspicion.

Lady Louisa had heard these two family names enough over the last several weeks to guess why the Duke was making calls on these families. He was still in the hunt for the lady in green. Though she was glad that he hadn't found her out as of yet, she also felt a little guilt that he was going to such great lengths to search when the lady he sought was in fact right in front of him. Her only hope was that perhaps he would find a companion in one of these ladies that he was considering as his mystery woman. Though a stab of jealousy waved over her with the thought of it, it would be better for him to find love and give up the chase, and it would be better for her relations to the

Hendrickson's if he never discovered her identity as the lady.

The days after the dinner party was not very enjoyable ones for all members of the Mentheith household. Both Lady Hendrickson and Miss Elisabeth were incredibly irritable with the knowledge that the Duke had left Bassen Park to search out his mystery woman.

To make matters worse, the following morning after the dinner party, Miss Elisabeth announced her knowledge of Colonel Jasper and Miss Mary to their mother. When pressed on the matter by her mother, Miss Mary had no choice but to confirm such affection and inform her mother that they had plans to wed. As expected, Lady Hendrickson was appalled by the prospect and forbade her daughter from spending any more time in his presence.

Though heartbreaking for Miss Mary to hear, she had no choice in the matter as Colonel Jasper was inclined to follow the Duke on his tour of possible mystery ladies. She did, however, receive a letter from the Colonel that she was forbidden to open or respond to.

“I will write to the Colonel,” Lady Louisa said a week after the dinner, while they both worked in the garden behind the house. “Your aunt has no right to object to me doing so. If there is information that you wish to pass to the Colonel, I would be happy to do so. I can also inform him why you have not written a response to him so that he doesn’t question your loyalty to your engagement.

Miss Mary was so happy that she burst out into tears instantly.

“Oh, Louisa, you would do that for me?” Miss Mary said between sniffles. “It has been eating me up not to see his letter or be able to even tell him why I cannot write back. I couldn’t bear it if he thought

I was turning my attention away from him.”

Lady Louisa enveloped her cousin in her arms and did her best to soothe her. Miss Mary was usually so steady and reserved of emotion. The sudden outburst of tears only showed how much turmoil Miss Mary had been forced to hold back since her mother’s scolding.

“You don’t have to fear, Mary. It will all work out in the end. After all, you have the Duke on your side. Your mother will surely not deny your marriage if only because it would displease the Duke and thereby ruin Elisabeth’s chances with him.”

“Mother will not care for that now. For surely the Duke will find his lady while he is away and the prospect will be gone. With that, all hope of the Duke’s influence will be lost to me.”

“I cannot say that such thing isn’t a possibility, but I can promise you that he will not find his lady in green while away.”

“Why ever not?” Miss Mary asked looking up at her cousin in confusion.

Lady Louisa shouldn’t have said as much. She was willing to do anything to comfort her beloved cousin in a time of need, however.

With a heavy sigh, Lady Louisa responded, “because I know who the lady in green is. It is not any of those ladies that the Duke is seeking. That, of course, doesn’t mean he might not find a connection with one of them, and I truly hope he does and finds a lifetime of happiness,” she added quickly.

“Louisa, you know! Why did you not tell me when you found out? Was it someone in the village as Mother suspected coming uninvited?”

“No,” Lady Louisa hesitated. She still wasn’t sure if she should say at all.

“Please, you must tell me who it was. I will promise to keep your

secret as you have kept so many of mine.”

“It was me,” Lady Louisa finally said barely above a whisper. “Bess had me borrow one of your sister’s dresses after the incident with the sherry. I knew your mother hoped I wouldn’t come at all, and would have in fact been very cross to see me. When I saw them approach, I quickly hid, and that is when I encountered the Duke.”

Miss Mary sat for a moment with her mouth agape with shock. Finally, she closed it, and excitement glowed from her face.

“It is just as Jasper and I hoped,” Miss Mary finally said.

“What?” Lady Louisa countered confused.

“We were sure that you and the Duke were perfect for each other. That is why he insisted on your presence even when you and the Duke were on less than happy terms. I just know you two are the perfect match. We must tell him right away!”

“No! We must not say anything,” Lady Louisa countered. “The Duke would be appalled if he realized it was me.”

“How could you think such a thing?” Miss Mary said with a sense of sadness in her eyes. “I know you two had some rocky conversations in the start, but I believe at the dinner party you got along so well. Not to mention the fact that you quite stole his heart at the ball.”

“I didn’t steal it, the idea of a mysterious woman did,” Lady Louisa countered.

“I don’t think that is true. I am certain that it was your personality that he fell in love with.”

“It doesn’t matter either way,” Lady Louisa waved off. “You know of our families’ difference. If I were to announce to the Duke my identity and he was for some ridiculous reason ask me to marry him, it would only cause more strife between our families.”

“It wouldn’t create strife between you and I. I would be more than happy with it. Oh, it would be so wonderful,” she added as the thoughts came flooding into her mind. “We would both live at Bassen Park. What great fun we could have together. Just think that glorious medicinal garden would be yours to tend and I could help you with it,” Miss Mary continued in excitement.

“Mary, you are jumping far too ahead of yourself,” Lady Louisa cautioned.

“But you do care for him now don’t you? I can tell already by the way you speak of him.”

Lady Louisa hesitated. She still was tormented with her own feelings on the man and what ramifications it would have for those around her. She couldn’t bear the thought of causing rifts in her family.

“Don’t think of Mother or Elisabeth,” Miss Mary said sensing Lady Louisa’s hesitation. “I want you to look inside yourself only. How do you personally feel about the Duke? Has your heart been turned to him?”

Lady Louisa took a moment to think of all the times she had encountered him, from their first meeting in the woods to the last conversations at the hearths side a week ago. If she was being truly honest with herself, she did have feelings for the Duke.

Who wouldn’t though? He was a most handsome gentleman with his broad shoulders, square masculine features, enchanting green eyes, and a heart-stopping smile. More than that, he was a warm-hearted gentleman who looked to help those in need, cared greatly for his friends and family, and had even greatly influenced her own character in a positive way.

Had it not been for his offer and help to improve her study of medicinal practices she wouldn’t have become the independent woman she was now. In truth, she had grown quite fond of the Duke over the past few months since meeting him. Even more than that,

that night at the ball she too had shared the same unexplainable feelings alone in that room with the Duke.

Lady Louisa gave a long sigh. It was enough for Miss Mary to confirm what she believed to be true.

“It matters little how I feel, the truth of the lady in green must stay hidden. Promise me that you will do so for me?” Lady Louisa asked.

Miss Mary didn’t want to agree to such terms, but she had already assured Lady Louisa she would keep any secret that was asked of her. She couldn’t go back on her word now.

“If it is what you wish, of course, I will do so.”

Rowland brushed his jacket as he prepared for the evening meal. Five ladies and two months later he was no closer to finding his lady in green. Earlier this afternoon he had finally arrived at his last destination. If this was not the lady, he hoped for he wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

“Are you ready?” Jasper asked from behind him as he entered the room in his own dinner jacket.

Rowland gave a deep sigh and put his own jacket on and tugged at his neck tie. The last two months had been nothing but disappointments for him and false hope for the ladies he visited. He was beginning to feel that he was making an enemy with each house he left without proposing to the young lady of it.

He turned to his friend. He could scarcely call Jasper just his friend any longer. He had waited patiently through all the months while they traveled from house to house never complaining. Rowland knew it was made even harder by the fact that Miss Mary had been forbidden to write him.

Luckily Lady Louisa had been kind enough to carry correspondence between the two. Certainly, it wasn’t the same as sharing information

between his betrothed, but at least it was better than nothing.

Jasper had shared every letter he received from Lady Louisa. Rowland found himself feeling more and more admiration for the lady with each passing note. For the most part, she spoke of things that she and Miss Mary did to pass away the summer months.

She would also share news she gleaned from Mrs. Vance on Bassen Park. Rowland expected that the ladies visited Mrs. Vance and his uncle often. It made him happy to know that his uncle, who had chosen to stay behind at Bassen, was well looked after.

He took one long deep breath before determining that he was ready and turned to exit his room with Jasper at his heels. They walked down the stairs and into the drawing room while they waited for the rest of the party to appear.

First Lord and Lady Filton entered the room. He spoke light conversation with Lord Filton while he waited for his youngest daughter to appear. Finally, she did, and Rowland caught his breath in anticipation.

She was tall and thin in shape with a narrow face and intricately placed blond ringlets so light they almost looked white. In an instant, Rowland was sure this wasn't the lady he was searching for. He gave out an air of defeat.

What was he to do now? Of course, he would have to spend the remainder of the meal pretending not to feel beaten down by his last hope being taken from him. Worse than that he would again have to spend the week visiting with the Filton though he knew she was not the one he searched for.

Rowland couldn't help but sigh relief as he saw Bassen Park come into view in the carriage a week later. Jasper who had been asleep for most of the return home was now awake in anticipation. Though he had no excuse to call on Miss Mary this day, he was happy just to be back in the same county.

“What am I to do now,” Rowland said more to himself than anything else.

Jasper looked over to his friend and felt pity on him. Jasper had experienced the same enlightenment when he had found Miss Mary. The drastic difference was that something had grown from it. He couldn’t imagine to have experienced such love and not even know the name of the lady.

“Perhaps it is time to look forward,” Colonel Jasper said.

“How so,” Rowland said fairly frustrated with the whole situation. “I have run out of options in finding her.”

“Well, what I mean by forward is past this lady. Clearly, she doesn’t want to be found despite all your efforts. Perhaps it is time to let her go.”

Rowland thought over these words as the carriage came to a stop before his home. Could he just let her memory go? He knew he could never move backwards to the man he was before. Over this season he had matured and grown into the man he hoped that his father had wanted him to be. He would not just turn and run after failing.

He could only see one move forward. He would keep his ground here at Bassen Park and hope to someday find his Lady in Green or at least someone who might erase her memory from his heart.

“Mother, you will never guess what Lady Julianna just found out,” Miss Elisabeth said upon returning home.

“What is it dear,” Lady Hendrickson said with a heavy sigh.

Lady Hendrickson had been overly irritable these last few months. Lady Louisa suspected it was due to the absence of the Duke, but also because summer didn’t want to give into fall.

For Lady Louisa, this was a wonderful thing. She was about able to collect two full harvests this season from the glorious extension of the season. For Lady Hendrickson who was still cloaked in black to mourn her husband properly aside for the night of the ball, she found it rather uncomfortable.

Before Miss Elisabeth spoke she handed over a cool glass of water to her mother. Lady Hendrickson took it with little thanks and continued to fan herself in the coolest part of the drawing room.

“I spoke to Lady Julianna at the market today. She was also acquiring a dress in green. Did you know that the shop has been quite unable to keep the color since the ball with the Duke? It quite ridiculous if you ask me,” Miss Elisabeth waved off.

Lady Louisa, who was seated next to the window as she worked on an embroidery pillow, rather thought to remind Miss Elisabeth that she had worn her green pastel dress when the Duke last came for dinner. Instead, she kept her focus on her work.

“What do I care of Lady Julianna’s knowledge of the color options at

the seamstress,” Lady Hendrickson snapped.

“That is not the news, Mother,” Miss Elisabeth said ignoring her mother’s irritated tone.

“I have heard from Lady Julianna this day that the Duke of Rowland has finally returned. Even better he has returned with no lady on his arm, or promise made. Apparently, he was quite upset to that fact.”

Lady Louisa felt a pang of guilt whereas her aunt immediately perked herself up to the prospect of the unattached Duke’s return.

“Did I not say his hunt would be for naught. He has wasted all that time and I assure you in the course has only realized no fantasy girl can keep up with your accomplishments,” Lady Hendrickson said completely beside herself with excitement to her eldest daughter.

“Did Lady Julianna say anything about Colonel Jasper returning with him?” Miss Mary couldn’t help but ask.

“Even if she had,” Lady Hendrickson interjected, “it is of no consequence to you. I have told you before he is not a suitable candidate for one of my daughters. Uh, this infernal heat,” Lady Hendrickson added as her excitement had lead to perspiration.

“Mr. Henderson told me that in America when summers are extended into the fall, it is called an Indian Summer,” Lady Louisa said by way of distracting her aunt from focusing on Miss Mary and Colonel Jasper. “He says that the trees turn the most beautiful shades of orange and reds to match the natives’ skin tones.” “I don’t care a wit for what those disloyal ruffians call it; it’s inhumane,” Lady Hendrickson snapped back. “There are pressing matters we must discuss, and I can find no way to do so when this heat distracts me from every thought I have.” Lady Hendrickson said as she waved her fan furiously.

Just as Lady Hendrickson was finally beginning to settle herself, while Miss Elisabeth waited on the edge of her seat for their next move, a

ring came to the door. After a few moments, a note was delivered to Lady Hendrickson.

“Just as I suspected,” she said after reading it over and before using it too to fan herself with. “The Duke has invited us to Bassen Park for an afternoon picnic and strawberry picking. He says his fields have become overrun with his absence and especially good harvest.”

“What a wonderfully fun idea,” Miss Mary said secretly happy to have a chance to see Colonel Jasper again.

Lady Hendrickson looked at her youngest daughter very severely.

“You will not attend, my dear,” she stated simply.

“What? Mother why ever not? Please let me go,” Miss Mary said in desperation.

“The emotion in your voice is the very reason you shan’t go. I will not have you speaking to that Colonel and putting false hopes into his head that you two are still attached. I have stated you are not and that is the end of that!”

Miss Mary struggled to keep her tears back. Lady Louisa rather wanted to lash back out at her aunt. She knew that would be to no avail. Instead, she let her heart calm on her cousin's behalf before speaking. She did her best to sound indifferent to the matter.

“It might be offensive to the Duke if Miss Mary was not to attend.”

“Why would you think such a ridiculous thing?” Lady Hendrickson countered.

“Well, surely he must have at least some knowledge of the attached feelings of Colonel Jasper and Miss Mary. I feel the Duke might feel insulted that you would not approve his friend a match for Miss Mary and still consider Miss Elisabeth for himself.”

Miss Elisabeth looked at her mother imploringly on this matter. No doubt it had crossed her mind as well at her mother's original outburst.

"Are you so set on the Colonel?" Lady Hendrickson finally asked considering it now that she saw there would be some use to the match.

"I care for him deeply, Mother. He is a great man. Not only this he has prepared to sell his commission and will be staying on at Bassen Park overseeing the property. Surely you know that he will provide enough security for me."

"Yes, yes," her mother waved off. Lady Louisa wondered if her aunt ever truly cared about her daughter's security or just securing a titled to show up to Lady Louisa's mother. "I don't care much about all of that. Does he have a great enough influence with the Duke that you can recommend your sister to him?"

It was an uncomfortable feeling for Miss Elisabeth to realize the fate of her happiness might very well rest in the hands of her younger sister.

"I know that they are very good friends, practically consider one another brothers," was all Miss Mary could say in honesty.

She knew that Colonel Jasper would be no more willing to recommend her sister anymore than the Duke would be willing to take such recommendation.

"If your Colonel is willing to support our cause, I will consent to the marriage," Lady Hendrickson said with a narrowed eye on her youngest daughter. "What shall I do?" Miss Mary asked later while she walked with Lady Louisa to Mr. Johnson's cottage.

His wife was pregnant with their third child, and Lady Louisa and Miss Mary had gone each day to help Mrs. Johnson tend to the other children and see to the needs of the house at her advanced term.

“My mother could not have set terms more impossible than these.”

“Never fear, Mary. We only have to convince your mother that the Colonel is recommending your sister until your marriage.”

“And how can we ever make that possible?”

“Well,” Lady Louisa said slowly. “I suppose we could ask the Duke to be willing to show attention to Elisabeth for a time. In that way, your mother would think she was recommended to him. Your marriage could be as soon as a month’s time from now.”

“Oh, that would be so wonderful,” Miss Mary said whimsically, and Lady Louisa couldn’t help but feel some of her excitement. “However, I am not sure the Duke would ever agree to such a thing.”

“I think he would. After all, we can be certain the picnic was only an excuse on behalf of his friend. I think he would be willing to do so for a short period of time.”

On the following day, the ladies all piled into the open carriage and began the short trip to Bassen for an afternoon picnic. Much to Lady Hendrickson's relief, a cool breeze had finally begun to blow giving her some relief.

Perhaps it was this fact that had put her in such a pleasant mood thus far. She had not reprimanded or nitpicked a single one of her charges once that day, which was very unusual for her.

Lady Louisa would have rather liked to do a little nitpicking herself when Miss Elisabeth came down in the forest green dress. It was clear for all the accusations about other's ladies desperate attempt to catch the Duke's attention by personifying the lady in green she was doing the same.

However little did she know that it was also in the exact same dress that the true lady in green had worn. Lady Louisa greatly hoped that the Duke wouldn't connect the dots but feared he might. For this reason, she was rather racked with nerves of her own as they made their way down the lane.

Miss Mary too was full of butterflies but for a much different reason. It would be the first time she was to set eyes on Colonel Jasper after their months apart. Her greatest fear was that perhaps his affections had cooled for her over time. Of course, Lady Louisa had done her best to reassure her that such a thing was not possible, but still, the fear persisted.

They arrived at Bassen park and were greeted by the whole household party. For Lady Louisa, Miss Mary and Mr. Vaughan, not much time

had passed since last they saw each other. The three chatted comfortably like the good friends they had become over the summer months.

Soon the opportunity came for Miss Mary to speak with Colonel Jasper in relative privacy as they all walked the path to a patch of woods where the wild berries grew. "As Lady Louisa told you, Mother learned of our engagement and was very unhappy about the prospect," Miss Mary said with Jasper on her left and Lady Louisa on her right.

"Lady Louisa, however, was able to change her mind. She will consent to our union but with one condition," Miss Mary continued.

"What ever it is, I will gladly accept it," Colonel Jasper said.

Lady Louisa couldn't help but feel caught up in the excitement of the moment.

"She only finds the engagement agreeable if you were to recommend my sister to the Duke," Miss Mary said timidly.

"But you know the Duke has no wish to accept her. I don't mean to offend," he added quickly, "he has no desire to accept anyone outside of his mysterious lady."

Miss Mary and Lady Louisa exchanged knowing glances, but Miss Mary still held her tongue on the matter.

"I understand this. It would not be required for the Duke to court Elisabeth in earnest. If he would but merely show interest until we were wed, then mother would be satisfied."

"Yes, until we were wed and the Duke removed his attentions. Then how would she feel? I understand the method, but this is also your mother we speak of. Are you sure you would be willing to upset her so?" Colonel Jasper said slightly wishing he had a mother of his own to care about his life.

“I promise you, Huge,” Miss Mary said in a very intimate tone that made Lady Louisa blush for being close by, “My mother is not one to ever accept us. If every aspect of life isn’t to her benefit, it will never be good enough. We will never be good enough. That should prevent our own happiness, should it?”

“Of course not,” he said smiling down at her affectionately. “I will bring the idea up to the Duke at my earliest chance.”

“And with luck, we could be married within a fortnight,” Miss Mary said with a childlike enthusiasm that she so rarely showed.

“Sooner if I can help it,” he responded with a teasing wink that sent Miss Mary giggling.

Lady Louisa held back from walking with them. She wanted to give them the privacy. They had been forced to have her mediation for the last several months by letter, and now they finally had a chance to truly speak their hearts without others listening in. She didn’t want to rob them of such joy.

“They look quite happy don’t they,” the Duke said startling Lady Louisa from her thoughts. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” he apologized quickly.

“You didn’t really,” Lady Louisa said though she had clutched to her chest and gasped. “You just walk so quietly. I didn’t hear you behind me.”

“I shall endeavor to be much louder of step next time,” he said with a playful smile. “I am sure there will be many more times we will meet as a small party. It seems the only way that we can bring our two companions together,” he added nudging to the Colonel and Miss Mary ahead of them.

Lady Louisa rather considered tell the Duke the plan formed and his part to play in it, but she rather thought it would come better from Colonel Jasper, so she kept her mouth shut on the matter.

"It is wonderful weather today is it not?" Lady Louisa finally said.

"Now are we to talk about the weather?" The Duke retorted with a rise of a dark brow.

"I don't mean to make shallow conversation," Lady Louisa answered his look. "It is just finally wonderful to get some respite from the heat."

He smiled relaxingly as he looked down at her.

"I couldn't agree more. Worse I spent the last week cooped up in a drawing room. Lady Georgiana Fulton was quite adamant about not going in the sun. It was very stifling."

"How do you feel about going out in the sun, Lady Louisa?" Rowland inquired.

"Well, I am here, so I would surmise that I am not too concerned with it. Though I have not yet reached the brave level of my sister-in-law, Abigail, who will spend a whole day with her sunbonnet in her hand and not care a wit for what others may think of it."

"And you are not like this?" Rowland asked hoping to get a better understand of this lady.

"Well," she said motioning to her hat, "I do currently have my bonnet on."

"That is true, but perhaps so that I may not see a blush rise to your cheek should I say anything worthy of such an action."

"And what might you say, Your Grace, to make me blush," Lady Louisa said already blushing from his brazen words.

"Well," he said calmly as if he was contemplating some options. "I might first comment on how beautiful Miss Elisabeth's dress is today."

Lady Louisa swallowed hard, “And why would you think I would blush at such a comment?”

Lady Louisa couldn't bring herself to look up into his eyes for an answer. He didn't give one right away, and finally, she was forced to meet his gaze.

He bore deep into her with those eyes, almost willing a confession out of her.

She half expected she might. She saw a yearning deep inside those eyes that she had felt herself ever since the ball.

Finally, she looked away unable to give him the answer they both wanted her to say. After a few moments with the pressure of the silence, she made an excuse to hold back and speak with Mr. Vaughan.

The rest of the day was a great enjoyment for Lady

Louisa. She kept close to her two friends, Mary and

Colonel Jasper, as they laid out blankets and ate a light luncheon in the warmth of the sun and the cooling breeze.

She did notice, however, that the Duke was giving Miss Elisabeth several scrutinizing looks over her gown. He knew for a surety that it was the right dress and he also knew for a surety that Miss Elisabeth hadn't been the one to wear it at the masquerade.

Lady Louisa's one hope was that the Duke would simply just consider that Miss Elisabeth just happened to own the same dress, in the same color, with the same lace trim. Even as she thought such thing, she knew it was a ridiculous leap to take.

“It is the dress is it not?” Miss Mary whispered to Lady Louisa as the two of them forged for berries after their meal.

Lady Louisa looked over to Miss Elisabeth who was filling a basket next to her mother and then to the Duke who had left his own foraging behind for a deep conversation with the Colonel. Lady Louisa didn't have to guess to know what they were talking about.

She hoped that their focus was on enlisting the Duke's help in the Colonel's marriage endeavors and not the dress.

"It is," Lady Louisa said as she placing another plump berry in the basket.

"It is easy to see the Duke knows it too. Why not tell him the truth of it? Can you not see how his health has been hurt by this search? If you will not have him, that is one thing, but at least put him out of his misery."

Lady Louisa studied the Duke closer. Though he still had his normal long frame and square jaw, his smile did seem to falter before reaching the light of his emerald eyes. His cheeks did look slightly more sunken, but Lady Louisa had just assumed it was the exhaustion of so much travel.

It pained her deep inside to know she had been the cause of such great suffering. If she would but tell him the truth, perhaps it would be enough to solve the mystery for him. For he could never actually desire marriage when he found his Lady in Green to be the rather plain Lady Louisa.

"It would be to know one's benefit for me to say such a thing, including you. Could you honestly say your mother would allow your marriage to proceed if it was made known that I was the lady in green?"

Miss Mary digested this fact for a few moments.

"I see your point," she said. "I cannot allow my happiness to be on the heel of your unhappiness, however."

“I am not unhappy,” Lady Louisa assured her.

Miss Mary gave her a pointed look. “Had you not told me that you were the woman from the ball, I am sure I would have made the conclusion on my own. You were a changed person after that night. It has changed both of you.”

“Is it true?” A male voice said from behind them.

Both ladies quickly whipped around in their place to see a figure standing over them. For a moment Lady Louisa was all panicked and sure she was to faint. The sun stood behind the tall frame darkening his visage to nothing but an outline.

“Is it true?” He repeated. “Were you the Lady in Green?” he hissed out in barely an audible whisper.

Lady Louisa and Miss Mary stood before the man. Lady Louisa gave an audible sigh of relief to see Colonel Jasper standing before them.

“It is but...” Lady Louisa started.

“I knew it! I knew all along from the moment I first met you I knew that you would be the perfect match for Rowland. Why have you not told him? What have you to hide? He practically knows himself. He hasn’t stopped badgering me, insisting that Miss Mary is wearing the green dress.”

“It’s a complicated matter, Huge,” Miss Mary interceded on behalf of her cousin.

“You knew too?” He asked in surprise to his fiancé.

“But I swore her to secrecy,” Lady Louisa added quickly.

“But why? Why keep it a secret?”

“First off, look at me. I mean only to save the Duke the embarrassment of his mistake,” Lady Louisa said quickly.

“You have traded modesty for self-shaming Lady Louisa. I know Rowland well. Any man would be so lucky for you to accept him. He has grown in affection for you these past months. I would dare say the only thing holding him back is this elusive Lady. You are she! Why not tell him so?”

“I can’t; I just can’t. Not until after your engagement is announced,” Lady Louisa said full of sorrow.

The remainder of the day was less enjoyable for Lady Louisa as a dark cloud of deception held heavy over her. She couldn’t decide what would make her dislike herself more, if she did tell the Duke and permanently offend her aunt ruining any future relationship, or keeping the secret though she saw it clearly pained him.

“You seem quite sullen,” a man’s voice started Lady Louisa from her thought.

She looked around with a start and realized where most had moved on to collect berries elsewhere; she had stayed seated underneath the shadow of a tree feeling its darkness deep from inside her.

“I didn’t mean to startle you again. I forgot I must tread heavier in your presence,” the Duke said coming to sit next to her and place a berry in her half filled basket.

“I don’t mean to seem so. I am having a wonderful time of this today,” Lady Louisa did her best to seem bright.

“I believe with that statement I have come full circle in understanding you,” the Duke said with a studied air.

“What ever do you mean?”

“Well, you were so cross with my attempt at hiding my true self in the past only because it is an impossibility for you to do. I could read your face as well as any book,” he added with a chuckle.

Lady Louisa couldn't help but give a little laugh too. She was an easy one to read. It was amazing she had kept her secret thus far.

"I just suppose I feel rather downhearted for Mary and Colonel. It is so cruel the way my aunt is treating them," she said feeling the venom of spite also include the ways her aunt had also altered her own possible happiness.

"It pains me also to see things play out as they are. It is also most unnerving to see you so upset," he said looking down at her with affection.

Lady Louisa let her gaze drift up to him.

"Well, I suspect that now Jasper and Miss Mary will receive their due happiness, despite your aunt. Would that not be something to brighten your disposition over?"

"'Tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure.' I can't see how she will hold true to her word," Lady Louisa quoted from Shelley before she even realized what she was doing.

Suddenly her hands clamped over her mouth while the Duke's grey simultaneously.

"Let me guess," he said after a moment, "Percy Shelley." Lady Louisa still had her hand cupped over her mouth, but she nodded yes.

"I believe he is a poet you hold very dear to your heart," the Duke continued to confirm. Lady Louisa could only nod again.

"It was you then," he said as he searched his own thoughts. "Yet you kept the truth from me."

Lady Louisa removed her hand and placed it on the Duke's arm.

"It was only for your own sake. I didn't want you to be disappointed. Not to mention how much it would enrage my aunt. I feared it would

ruin Mary's prospects permanently. I did promise Mary and the Colonel I would tell you after they were wed."

"They knew too?" Rowland said feeling personally offended by his friends withholding from him.

"Well, Colonel Jasper only found out today. You must see I couldn't tell you for Mary's sake? I told you how volatile my aunt and mother's relationship is. It would only make things worse between the two families if I made such things known."

"Why? I suppose your aunt would again be furious that

I chose you over that self-important Miss Elisabeth."

"I am not putting such words in your mouth, Your Grace," Lady Louisa said hurriedly. "I would not presume that you would still hold affections in your ideals of the woman at the ball now that you know the real person behind them."

"I promise you," he said tipping his head down just slightly and lowering his voice, "My honor to my word kept me searching, but my heart has long you to be the one."

Lady Louisa looked up at him with tears brimming in her eyes. He had spoken the words she had never dreamed to hear him say.

"But such things could never be determined by one night," Lady Louisa shook the tears out of her eyes. "It was just the infatuation of the moment. We surely are not good for one another. I could never bear to stay behind while you return to the Indies."

"And I would not wish you to," Rowland countered. "You have stirred change in me to be the man my uncle wanted me to become, and I promise you, you started that process long before you hid behind that gold mask. I care little of location, as long as you would let me be at your side."

“I have always wondered what the Indies might be like,” she said with a soft smile.

He relaxed a little. Looking around to make sure no one was watching he gingerly picked up her hand and kissed it ever so softly.

“I am certain you would love it,” he said with his lips against her flesh.

“Will you accept me then?” Rowland asked looking up at her hand behind his thick lashes.

Lady Louisa felt her heart beating in her chest. She wanted to scream yes and wrap her arms around him, but she also had the nagging knowledge of Mary and the Colonel.

“What of Mary? I cannot take my happiness at the expense of hers.”

“Is that all that keeps you from being my wife,” he asked with a growing smile.

She looked at his growing smile questioningly. He was much better at hiding his thoughts than she was.

“I would secure happiness for all of us this very moment if you would but allow me to,” he said letting go of her hand and instead brushed his fingertips against her cheek.

She leaned into his touch and close her eyes. The sensation his gentle caress gave her was exhilarating and addicting all at the same time. She opened her eyes and looking lovingly back as she leaned into his touch she nodded the affirmative.

“Well that settles it then,” Rowland said coming to stand.

Lady Louisa was a little shocked by his quick movement. He reached down and helped her up from her place as well.

“I am not sure what is settled, Your Grace,” she said as she leaned against his steadying touch.

“Come with me, my love, and I will have us all toasting to our futures by dinner,” Rowland retorted while holding out his arm for Lady Louisa to take.

She did so and together they walked over to where the others had migrated to. It was not lost for an instant on Lady Hendrickson that her niece and the Duke had interlinked arms. The pointed stare she shot Lady Louisa made her remove her arm rather reluctantly from its place.

“I have a bit of an announcement to make,” the Duke said gathering everyone to him. “Let us retire back to our place at the luncheon so I may share it with all of you.”

Mr. Vaughan simply mumbled that his knees were quite ready to be over with all this crouching over berry shrubs and was glad that it was finally over.

As they walked back to the picnic area, Lady Louisa watched the Duke of Rowland and Colonel Jasper speak in a rapid whisper. She had no idea what he was planning but did hope that it would work.

Finally, they were all again settled in the warmth of the setting sun while the Duke stood before them all preparing to speak.

“I have done much soul searching these last few months since returning to England. I am happy to say that much of it has to do with a certain lady,” he flashed a look at Lady Louisa but let his gaze linger on Miss Elisabeth.

Miss Elisabeth sat a little taller in her spot.

“I was not the only one to find my eye caught by a fine lady either. My dear friend, really brother, Huge Jasper,

has informed me of his intentions to marry Miss Mary Hendrickson.”

All eyes looked at the couple. Really only Mr. Vaughan was unaware of the prospect of marriage though he had known that Jasper had feelings for her.

“Now, Lady Hendrickson,” he said turning his attention to the lady who was rather fuming at the Duke’s public announcement that attached her daughter to the Colonel. “I understand you felt some hesitation in their engagement. I completely understand. After all, it must be hard to allow one’s daughter away from the safety of your home.”

Lady Hendrickson flicked her fan back and forth a few times.

“I can assure you that not only is Jasper like a brother to me, but he is also the finest gentleman I have ever known. Not only this, but I believe this connection to be but the first between our two families.”

He looked again at Miss Elisabeth. Lady Louisa’s eyes widen as his actions dawned on her. He was going to use Lady Hendrickson own manipulative ways to get her to publicly accept the Colonel in hopes that it would then mean the Duke would attach himself to Elisabeth. Miss Elisabeth could hardly contain herself. It was clear to her that he was speaking of a marriage between the two of them. Lady

Hendrickson didn't waste time agreeing with this.

"Your Grace, you are quite right that I had some hesitation for I care for my girls so deeply," she said a little too dramatically. "But with your assurance of the Colonel's character, I see no reason why the two should not be wed," she added with a slick smile.

"Truly, Mother?" Miss Mary asked.

"Of course, dear. I only want your happiness after all," Lady Hendrickson said for the benefit of the public display.

"I am so pleased to hear you say that," the Duke said rubbing his hands together. "Then if you don't mind I would like to announce one more thing. Then perhaps we can all retire to the house to toast in celebration of the future."

Miss Elisabeth fretted with her skirts waiting for her time to stand as the Duke publicly proposed to her. She was sure that there could be no other kind of announcement he would want to make at this time.

"I do hope that Jasper will forgive me for making my own matrimonial announcement in the same moment as his," he said looking at his friend.

Jasper only nodded in agreement, while Mr. Vaughan, who was feeling rather drowsy at this point, perked right up at his nephew's words.

He reached down to the space between Lady Louisa and Miss Elisabeth. For just a second she thought his taunting might be a bit cruel, but one look at Miss Elisabeth's high held nose washed away any guilt on that front.

"Lady Louisa would you please come stand by me," the Duke asked reaching his hand out to her.

She took it though blushing red and stood next to him. Lady Louisa

could barely keep back the smile at seeing both her aunt and Miss Elisabeth's shocked expression.

"Earlier today, I asked Lady Louisa if she would be my wife. She told me no," he said looked down at her with a smile.

"She said what?" Mr. Vaughan asked unsure if his hearing was off.

"She said no," he explained to his uncle, "unless I could ensure that she and Miss Mary could share in engagement celebrations. I am happy to announce that, thanks to Lady Hendrickson, I can make that promise. So, Lady Louisa Frasier," he asked in front of everyone present, "would you do me the honor of being my wife." Lady Louisa did her best to choke back the tears that were bursting to fall out. This man had used Lady Hendrickson's own skills of deception and misleading to somehow pull out a miracle.

There would be no way for Lady Hendrickson to deny Mary her happiness now after approving it so publicly. Of course, she had done so under carefully created misunderstandings. Though Lady Louisa was sure her aunt would never forgive her for such a thing, she was sure she cared very little for Lady Hendrickson's approval at that moment.

"Yes, I will," Lady Louisa responded looking up into her future husband's eyes.

Epilogue

“My love,” a soft deep voice cooed against Lady Louisa’s ear to rouse her from her sleep.

Lady Louisa woke to find herself having drifted off by the gentle rocking of the carriage ride.

“Oh, have I slept long?” The Duchess of Rowland said raising her head from her husband’s shoulder.

“For a bit,” Rowland said while he waited for his new wife to waken fully. “We are just getting to the docks; I thought you might want to see it.”

“Oh yes,” Louisa said as she leaned over her husband to see the view of the coast out his window. “And we leave tomorrow?” She asked as her eyes scanned the many ships below.

“Yes, provided there is a good tide the ship will leave in the early afternoon.”

Her eyes furrowed as she concentrated on each ship.

“Are you regretting your decision. I know the Indies are far, but I can assure you that sailing the Mediterranean is quite safe even in the winter.”

Though he had retold her many tales of the warm winds that blew and the exotic animals, Louisa had a hard time imagining it with snow on the ground.

"I was just trying to see which one was ours. I don't understand how you could possibly tell," she said happy to sooth her husbands concerned. "I am not regretting this at all. In fact, I am rather excited to have a warm Christmas. We can stay through the new year?"

"My love, we can stay as long as you wish," Rowland assured his wife. She smiled comforted by his words.

"I do want to return when Colton gets home though," she said more to herself. "His last letter said they plan to

sail in the spring. It will be so nice to meet our little nephew."

"Yes, and Gilchrist estates is less than a half a day's ride from Bassen Park. We will be quite close neighbors. I expect you will enjoy that since you speak so highly of your brother."

"I promise you will enjoy it too, Rowland," Louisa added as she was distracted by studying the ships again. "Is it that one?" She asked pointing down.

Rowland looked out his own window.

"That is a military Sloop, my love," he said with a hint of humor as if that point was quite clear. Louisa wrinkled her nose at his teasing words.

"Do you think Uncle James will be alright while we are gone though?" Louisa asked the concern seeming more real with the ships before her. She had started calling Mr. Vaughan as such the day of her wedding upon his request.

"He has Jasper and Mary to keep him company," Rowland replied.

"Yes, I suppose you are right. I guess I am just not used to going out on my own without a purgative to care or do something for another."

"Well," Rowland said resting his thumb under her little chin and

tipping it up ever so slightly. “I am afraid, my love, that on this trip, you will not be allowed to do anything but relax and enjoy it. I plan to treat you as a proper Duchess should be.”

“Oh, Rowland,” Louisa said waving off his words, “you don’t have to do any of that. I’m just happy that I can be here with you.”

“Funny,” he said with a wicked glen to his eyes, “You seemed quite contrary to that when you ran away from me at the ball.”

“Yes, well it’s a good thing you didn’t give up on finding me,” she responding tipping her head up more ready for one of his sweet kisses.

He didn’t have to be asked with words. He leaned down and met her lips with his own. Wrapping his arms around her, Rowland pulled her even closer against him in their already tight space of the carriage.

“It’s a good thing,” he said against her lips between kisses, “that you were willing to be caught in the end.”

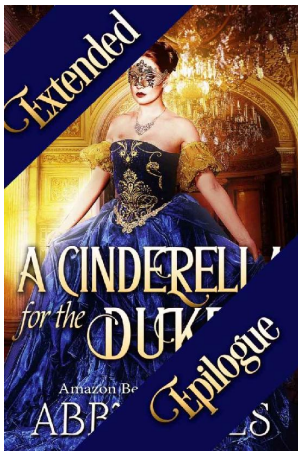
And he kissed her again, knowing that he would have the rest of his life with Louisa in his arms and yet it would still never be enough.

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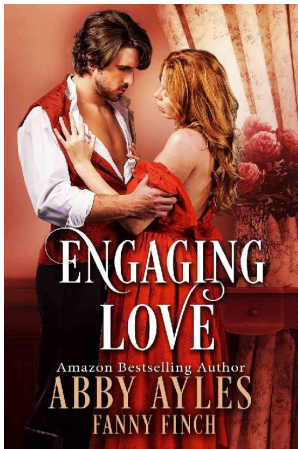


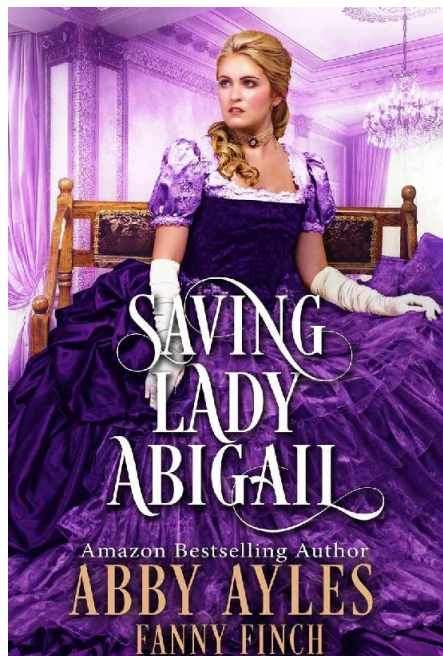
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Engaging Love

Natalie frowned at her elder sister, Bridget. Bridget was a lovely woman. Everyone said so. But Natalie rather thought she'd be prettier if she wasn't always looking so stern.

"That's another suitor gone," Bridget said.

She sighed. It was times like these that she could see a weight settling about her sister's shoulders like a wedding veil weighted with iron.

"I hardly see the problem," Natalie replied. She had dozens of men who were insisting that she add them to her dance card.

Bridget shook her head, as though Natalie was failing to see something right in front of her face.

"This is not a game," she told her. "You no longer have the choice of waiting."

Natalie wanted to fold her arms and pout. But that wouldn't have been ladylike. Bridget spoke as if she was a child. As though she could have somehow forgotten the dire straits they were in.

It was all Father's fault. Not that she entirely blamed him. She could still remember how he had been before Mother's death. He'd been jovial, kind, making time for his children.

After Mother died it was as though every time he looked at his daughters, all he could see was her. It stung to see her father turn away from her and her sisters. He sank into gambling, and would spend long hours in his office, cut off from the world.

It was his gambling that had ruined them. Regina of all people had been there to see it. Regina, their quiet, shy sister who hated large crowds and balls.

She'd been there to see Lord Pettifer take their father's money. And his land. Take everything they had in one fell swoop.

Natalie still couldn't believe it in a way.

How could Father have been so stupid? Even Regina, who preferred to sit and sew in a corner, knew who Lord Pettifer was. He was a most awful rake. He had tried to get Bridget, Natalie's eldest sister, to marry him and had been greatly offended when she had understandably declined.

Natalie would have not put it past him to go after Father directly as revenge for Bridget's refusal. There was much that she would not put past men.

But now she had to actually settle down and find a husband. Once it was discovered that she and her sisters had lost all their fortune and land, no man would have them. They would be destitute.

Only marriage could save them. That meant that all the balls, all the flirting, would be over. It made Natalie want to fling something. What was the point of life if one couldn't have fun?

If she was to marry, she wanted a husband who would let her continue to go to balls and call upon friends. She refused to be one of those wives who simply sat at home.

Yet, every man she had talked to seemed to want that. They loved how she flirted with them. She was quite good at it, if she did say so herself.

But was that flirtation, that liveliness that drew them in, something they wanted in a wife? No. It was as though they expected her to completely change her personality.

Natalie was not going to change herself. Not for anyone.

"Have you thought of talking about something besides yourself for two minutes?" Bridget asked.

She watched as her elder sister stood up and walked across the room with agitation. It was hard to see Bridget barely holding herself together in this fashion.

Bridget was—always had been—the most level-headed of them. Louisa, the second eldest, was sweet but too quiet and far too willing to go ahead with the whims of others. Elizabeth, younger than Natalie but older than Regina, the youngest, was far too impulsive and smart with her tongue.

But Bridget had always been of the most even temper and calm demeanor. Even before Mother's death, she had been endlessly patient at mediating arguments.

To see her now, so on edge, working hard to contain her panic—it was unusual and upsetting.

Natalie knew that they were in a precarious position. It wasn't that she had been ignorant of that. From the moment Regina had told them what happened, she had known. Life as they knew it was about to change.

They had to marry, and quickly, before anyone found out they were destitute. Otherwise they would be left to the streets. It was a prospect that terrified her.

She wasn't stupid. She knew what was at stake. Yet nothing drove the point home quite like seeing Bridget pace about the library, struggling and failing to completely hide her concern.

Natalie almost wished that Elizabeth was nearby. Usually, Elizabeth annoyed her. She was far too smug in her wit and would cut down any man who dared to spar with her.

It was nearly impossible to get a man while Elizabeth was there cutting them all down. Natalie was grateful that Bridget had sent Elizabeth with Louisa to the house of a mutual friend.

Before they had departed, she had bet her sister that she would find a suitor long before Elizabeth's potential suitor, Mr. Denny, had proposed.

"You'll drive him away," she had declared. "He is an honorable man, but he'll quail before you and renounce all intentions."

"I wouldn't be so sure of yourself," Elizabeth had replied. "At least men know that I have substance in my head."

Natalie had been so certain that she would be proposed to. She had tried every trick that she knew to appeal to the men who had come calling and whom she had called upon with her sister.

Yet here she was, with Lord and Lady Morrison's masquerade ball nearly upon them. And she had yet to be proposed to.

The latest man, Mr. Gentley, had been perfectly charming when Natalie had seen him last. They had danced twice with one another at the last ball she had attended.

He had been very attentive to her. He'd seemed to greatly enjoy her comments about the other dancers assembled. When she had coyly told him that he must wait another five turns before he could dance with her again he had laughed.

And so, Bridget, through Father, had extended an invitation for him to come calling. Mr. Gentley had come and she had made sure they were served tea.

Bridget had then been kind enough to sit in the corner and read a book, only interjecting occasionally. It was as alone as Mr. Gentley, or any suitor, and Natalie could be.

She had started by engaging him about some gossip she had heard regarding a Miss Florisant.

Yet Mr. Gentley hadn't wanted to talk about that.

Instead he had asked her about things such as household staffing. Had she ever hosted a ball of her own? What sort of books did she read? Did she enjoy sewing?

Sewing! Sewing was Regina's hobby, not Natalie's. It was as though Mr. Gentley did not know her at all.

Or, worse, that he thought the way that she was at balls was merely a front. That she was hiding herself in order to appeal to a man at a ball and was another way at home. Or—and this was the worst possibility of all! Perhaps he wanted her to simply change who she was now that marriage was on the table.

Natalie couldn't stand that idea.

In any case, conversation had come to a standstill. She had faltered horribly. What could she discuss besides dancing and gossip?

Bridget had to step in. It was mortifying for Natalie to watch her sister sweep in to save the conversation.

Surely, she could continue a conversation with a gentleman for the space of an hour or two?

Yet, Mr. Gentley had left looking as though he had turned to wood. Stiff, his eyes without expression. His complexion was even, however. He did not look pale or flushed.

In other words, he looked like a man climbing out of love rather than one falling deeper into it.

“We are about to be ruined,” Bridget said. She ran her fingertips over the spines of the books on the shelves.

She had always enjoyed books. As had Regina, actually. Natalie hadn’t seen much point to them. Talking to other people was far more interesting.

“You talk as if I’m unaware of this fact,” Natalie replied.

“You behave as though you are unaware of this fact,” Bridget said.

“If I’m to wed then I need to have some measure of compatibility with my husband, do I not?”

“Normally, yes,” Bridget said. “But we no longer have the luxury of that choice.

“Louisa is encouraging Elizabeth to marry Mr. Denny—whether she is amicable to him or not. I am to choose a husband by the time of the masquerade ball, whether I like it or not.

“I hope that Elizabeth is amicable to Mr. Denny. He is a fine man. And I suspect he has a greater backbone hidden beneath his modesty than most people give him credit for.

“And I hope that I shall be able to choose someone for whom I feel some fondness. That has always been my goal.

“But we have no choice anymore. Do you not understand that? We

may hate our husbands but if they are of means and name and they propose, we have to say yes.

“If we do not... Natalie.” Bridget turned to look her dead in the eye. “Do not make me tell you what will happen if we do not.”

Natalie could see the frustration in her sister’s eyes. That did not startle her. What did startle her was the panic.

Bridget never panicked. She was calm, even after Mother’s death.

Natalie would never forget that day.

She had been fighting with Elizabeth over something and desperately wishing for Mother to come home. Everything was better when Mother was around. Louisa was livelier, and Elizabeth was gentler. Father was happy. Baby Regina grew bolder.

Miss Cora had been visiting. She was an old friend, though Natalie knew not what had happened to her after Mother’s death. It was all a blur. The messenger had arrived.

Bridget had taken the letter, Miss Cora reading over her shoulder. Those two had done everything together.

After reading it, Bridget had gone very still. Miss Cora had wrapped her arms around her from behind, offering comfort. The intimate touch had told Natalie all she needed to know: something was dreadfully wrong.

But Bridget had not cried. Had not panicked. She had leaned into Miss Cora for a moment, and then pulled away and told her sisters,

“Sweethearts, I’m afraid we need to talk. Please gather in the drawing room while I speak with Father. I’ll be right back.”

And that had been that.

All through the funeral and the mourning. All through handling Father as he spiraled. All through raising Regina. Bridget had never once panicked.

Yet, here, now, there was cold fear fluttering in her blue eyes like a trapped butterfly.

Natalie let out the breath she was holding and dismissed what she was going to say. It was petulant anyhow. Instead she nodded meekly.

“Yes, Bridget, I understand,” she said. “The next man that arrives, I shall do my best to please him.”

Never mind that she had been doing what she could to please her suitors. Bridget evidently thought she hadn’t been, and that was what mattered.

Natalie squared her shoulders. She could do this. She could surely charm at least one man into marrying her.

Couldn’t she?

John Ridgecleff, heir to the Earldom of Mountbank, was finding himself in rather dire straits.

He stared at the letter he had just received from England. He had been passing his time quite pleasantly on the Continent. The museums, the masters, the scholars!

What more could a man of leisure possibly want in life? He had thought it only best to spend his youth soaking up the pleasures here. Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, and all the rest. Surely there was nothing wrong with that.

And yet here was a letter from his father, speaking quite to the contrary.

Dear John, the letter began,

I hope that you are still at your hotel by the time this letter reaches you. I shall assume it has, and if I do not hear from you, shall presume you are ignoring my instructions.

My entreaties that you return home have fallen upon deaf ears time and again. I understand that Europe has its temptations. The land is lovely, the history and art are of a fine nature, and I hear the women can be art in and of themselves.

But it has been years since you have last darkened the door of your home. You are the heir to this land. It is time that you learned how to run it.

Your sister and younger brother shall loathe to hear I admit this, but I am not well. They protest I have many years in me yet. I am not so certain.

The pressing of my years upon me turns my mind to the matter of inheritance, more strongly than it has before. Edward has been helping me about the house and grounds these last few years. While you have been

whiling away your time on frivolities, he has been the wall upon which I could lean.

Even more concerning than your lack of presence and care in your duties as heir are the reports I receive of your behavior. If the women of the gentry should learn you are a rake, not a one of them shall have you.

The ones that will still have you, of course, will not be the sort of women you want in charge of such a fine estate as Mountbank.

You always spoke of wanting a sensible woman as your bride. You spoke of wanting one to accompany you on walks and read with you. What has changed you so that you indulge in playing with women like this?

It breaks my heart that you seem to have no care for how you treat others or for carrying on your family legacy.

I insist that you come home and show you are earnest in being the heir. This includes taking a wife. I shall expect you to return home in a month's time with a well-bred and betrothed woman accompanying you and an earnestness in your heart for the hard work being a keeper of this fine land requires.

If you fulfill neither of these duties—if you bring home a stupid, selfish woman, or if you bring home no woman at all, or if you show nothing but laziness and disinterest for the estate—then I shall disinherit you.

Do not think that I do this in jest. It breaks my heart to write this. I have locked myself in my study at a late hour, so that your siblings might not stumble upon me in my current state.

But my feelings of sadness must be pushed aside to do what must be done for the good of the estate. We are lords, John. We are tasked with upholding the tenants that keep the government running and taking care of England's land and her people.

Some men may take this duty lightly. I am not one of those men.

You must prove to me your worthiness, or I shall instate Edward in your place. I know that he has long held a wish to travel as well. I know that doing this will upset everyone. And I do not wish to cause you pain or demote you in any way.

But I must think of Mountbank's future. I will not have our family's legacy driven to ruin. If you will not rise up and be the man I know you can be, then I shall have to put your brother up in your stead.

Please, do not disappoint me in this. I hope beyond words that you will prove me wrong. But do not think that I will not hesitate to make good on my threat, either.

You have one month. I shall appreciate you writing me with updates to let me know you have received my letter and so forth. But in any case, if after one month I have not heard from you and you have not come home to fulfill my conditions, you shall be my heir no longer.

I remain,

Fitzwilliam Ridgecleff

John supposed he was lucky that his father hadn't bothered to list all of his official titles.

He cast the letter aside, trying to ignore how his hands trembled. His father was trying to be gentle with his words. John suspected his sister Emma had her hand in that. Emma had long tried to be the peacekeeper between John and their father.

It had only gotten worse after Mother had died. Father had always been stern with John but without Mother there to soften his temper he'd only gotten worse.

Could he really—could anyone—blame John for fleeing to the Continent and staying there while he could?

A part of him wanted to write Father and tell him to hang it all. He wasn't going to be called home like a wayward dog and lectured like a child.

But the idea of losing his inheritance...

It made his blood run cold. He nearly had to sit down.

Without his inheritance, he had nothing. His father wasn't disowning him completely so he still had his family name at the least. It was a kindness.

But without his inheritance he should have to enlist in the Army or Navy, or quickly become a lawyer. He might even have to enter the clergy.

An eldest son, and of an earl, forced to swiftly take up an occupation to sustain himself?

He would be a laughingstock. Oh, nobody would be so gauche as to do it to his face. He didn't know of anyone rude enough for that.

But behind his back? Oh, yes.

He would find certain doors barred to him. Invitations would be fewer. Some of his higher-up acquaintances would find excuses not to see him.

It would not be total disgrace, but it would be close enough.

He could not bear it. He would not bear it.

There was no choice for it then, in the end. He would have to fulfill his father's conditions.

Coming home and helping to run the estate and learning how to occupy his inherited position would be the easy part. He had never truly wanted to evade it. Although his behavior might suggest otherwise.

He would come to enjoy his duties. He was sure of it. Edward would be grateful and eager to help as well. His brother had written John a few times, expressing envy of his brother's travels and freedom. This would afford Edward the opportunity to travel on his own at last.

It would do him marvelous good to see Emma as well. She had inherited all of their mother's shy grace and sweet, demure nature. A kinder and more thoughtful creature, John was certain, had never lived. She could help him in winning Father's good graces back.

No, it was not the prospect of the duties or of seeing his siblings that concerned him.

It was more Father and his temperament, and the matter of a wife.

John had been in no hurry to wed. He was not a woman, her bloom of

youth there and gone in one season. He could afford to bide his time.

Or so he had thought. Apparently, according to his father, time was something he did not have.

And yes, he might have flirted around a bit. But how could he help it when many women he'd met were so vapid?

He wanted a sensible wife, someone quiet and thoughtful, someone he could debate with. His father was right, he wanted someone to read with, to discuss things with, to go on walks with.

Many women just seemed far more interested in dresses and gossip and the like. He couldn't stand that.

However, many women were also beautiful and good at flirting while at balls.

So why not flirt back? Why not indulge himself? And if sometimes he indulged himself a little too much, well, what of it?

Except that now he was out of time and needed to compress what would usually be months of courtship and selection into one month.

John raked a hand through his hair in frustration. How was he to find someone in so short of a time?

Then his eye fell upon the second letter he had received that morning.

It was from Lord and Lady Morrison, who had long been acquaintances of his family. It was an invitation, done up in gold leaf, to their masquerade ball. Their masquerade ball was held annually and was considered by many to be the party of the year.

If anyone would know of possible ladies for him, it would be the Morrisons. They knew everyone that there was to know. Indeed, they often knew things about people that they shouldn't.

He would find a wife at the masquerade ball, if not before. He would write to Father to let him know that he had received his letter.

Then he would write to Lord Morrison and ask him and his wife to please reply with a list of eligible young ladies who would serve him well as the mistress of Mountbank.

He could call upon these ladies in between now and the ball—but if nothing else, he did have the ball. Surely in the swirl of people he could find someone of good breeding who was to his tastes.

John's hands ceased trembling. This was nothing that he could not overcome. All he needed was to find a woman pleasing to the eye, with a good family name, who could stir in him the beginnings of fondness.

He did not even ask for love, at least not at first. Just a nature that he found agreeable.

And how hard could it be, really, to find a wife for an earl?

The answer to that question was: very hard.

John would have thought that his family name alone would grant him the favors of any unmarried lady.

He had not been wrong in this, at least not entirely. Various women were ready and willing to be wooed by him. However, some of their fathers had heard of his exploits in the Continent and were less inclined.

Furthermore, those who were so inclined had daughters who annoyed him to no end. Not one of them had beauty to justify their lack of brains. Those who did have brains turned them to cattiness rather than true wit and learning.

John despaired. Where was the grace, the poise, the accomplishments? What had happened to young women while he'd been gone from England?

Perhaps he was an old fogey, as Emma had sometimes liked to tease him. But was it really too much to ask that he wish for a wife who was sensible, capable of running a household, and enjoyed reading and his company? He wanted a woman of substance, not some ornament he could show off at parties. He wanted a proper life partner.

Lord Morrison, when John wrote him of his despair, was sympathetic.

My dear friend, I can well understand your frustrations. I would advise you to perhaps turn your attentions to the Hartfield family.

There are five daughters among them. One is spoken for, although propriety forbids me from saying to whom, but the other four are quite unattached.

The eldest, Bridget, is as sensible and controlled a young lady as you will

ever meet. She is one of the few one can label as truly accomplished.

However, while Bridget is said to be the brightest star of them all the other three are quite lovely.

The second youngest has the wit you seek, Miss Elizabeth. Some find her a little too liberal with her words but I dare say you'll find her a fair match for yourself.

The very youngest, Miss Regina, loves reading and solitude. She could do to learn to stand up for herself. She is of a stronger temperament than she gives herself credit for. But I think that only commends her.

The third, Natalie, you might find to your tastes. She is quick-witted and intelligent. She has captured the attention of many a man. And she is widely regarded to be the most beautiful.

I believe that their family is scattered at the moment. However, as you are attending our masquerade ball, I can be sure to make the necessary introductions.

One of them will surely be to your liking. Both my wife and I have known the family for many years and care greatly for all of them.

The letter then continued on into other matters.

John focused in on the part about the Hartfield family. Five of them, and only one spoken for? How odd. Surely if they were as lovely as Lord Morrison claimed, they would have all been engaged by this point?

Upon looking up the family in the registry, however, he could guess why. The two youngest were hardly out of their first season and the eldest, he supposed, had been preoccupied the last few years. The registry listed the mother as deceased some time ago, when they were all young.

As one who had also lost a parent at a young age, he could easily imagine that Miss Hartfield had to step in and focus more on mothering than on flirtations.

Still, four of them? One of them had to be good enough. And it almost didn't matter at this point. He had to choose someone and propose by

the night of the ball if he was to travel to his father's house in time to meet the demands.

The masquerade ball would undoubtedly last for hours. That should give him enough time to converse and dance with the women in question. The one who was the most appealing, or least distasteful, he'd have to choose.

It might turn out to be that all his hopes rested on one of the Hartfield ladies.

Natalie stood patiently as Bridget laced her up from behind.

“Are you excited?” Bridget asked.

“For the ball?” Natalie replied.

“No,” Bridget said. “To see our sisters again.”

“Oh.” In truth, Natalie hadn’t given too much thought to her sisters.

She had genuinely wished Louisa the best of luck with Mr. Fairchild. Her poor sister was a sweet soul and having to wait for a woman to die so that she might marry was an awful position.

Natalie did not much like Mr. Fairchild’s aunt. But then, nobody did. She was determined that her nephew secure his family’s future by marrying a daughter of a lord or some such.

If she found out that Mr. Fairchild had proposed to Louisa, it would all be over. He would be disowned. And so, they continued on in secret.

Fortunately, his aunt was rather ill and Natalie had hopes it would not be too much longer. But still. It was rather an awful thought, that your happiness depended upon someone else dying.

As for Elizabeth—well, Natalie had really only thought of her in a horrible way. That is, when she hoped that Elizabeth was ruining her chance with Mr. Denny.

It was selfish, she knew, but she’d been essentially turned away by every potential suitor. They had all visited, full of gaiety. And then, after an hour or so, they had hastily taken their leave.

It was enough to make a lady doubt herself.

Natalie did not want to be the only sister without a husband. Bridget

would choose someone that night, and that man would certainly propose the moment Bridget gave him a sign she'd say yes. It was how Bridget was.

Louisa was already spoken for. Regina wasn't but it hardly mattered, she was the youngest and essentially a child.

If Elizabeth was spoken for as well, that would only leave Natalie.

The shame of it, the very idea of it, made her cheeks burn.

"I must confess I've been worried about Regina," Bridget said. "She writes me often but I suspect that there is something she is not telling me."

"Regina, keeping a secret?" The idea was absurd. It meant that Regina had an exciting enough life that she needed to keep part of it secret. "I can't imagine it."

"I can tell when my sisters aren't telling me everything," Bridget replied. "Just as I know that you are holding back on me as well."

Natalie could feel Bridget's eyes boring into her from the mirror, but she turned away. "I'm only worried for Louisa, is all."

"You've never been worried about anyone else in your life," Bridget said. "You're worried for yourself."

Natalie picked up a ribbon and began to work it through her hair. "Why should I be worried for myself?"

"It's the night of the ball and you have yet to have even one proposal. You've yet to come close."

Natalie turned around, still fiddling with the ribbon just to give herself something to do.

"I'm sure I shall have a suitor soon." Natalie hoped that her voice was more confident than she felt.

Bridget raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Watch me charm every man in that ballroom," Natalie said. She truly felt confident. She had always been able to work a room.

“And then they shall call upon you and leave, as have all those who came before them,” Bridget responded. “You must mend your ways, Natalie, or you shall soon be too old to marry.”

Shame, hot and awful, curled in the pit of her stomach. It made her feel sick.

“And what about yourself?” she replied. She knew that it was shameful, but she could not help herself. She wanted to fling it all back in Bridget’s face like hot candlewax.

“You are the eldest. By all accounts you should be married. You are not without men who want you. We all know that. And yet you won’t take a husband.”

Bridget went a little pale but stood resolute. “I’ve been running a household and managing four sisters,” she said. “I would like to see you do that and find a husband at the same time.”

“It’s selfish,” Natalie said. “You say that all I do is think of myself. But you do the same thing! If you were thinking of us you would have gotten married long ago and gotten out of our way. How can any of us compete against you?”

“You are the one considered beautiful,” Bridget replied. “Since we’re discussing the opinions of the public.

“It would have been selfish for me to get married, Natalie. I would have left you all to a governess. And while I did not at all mind hiring one to teach us all the pianoforte and such, they cannot replace a mother’s touch.”

Bridget was still pale but now drew herself up, her eyes flashing. She seemed taller and darker almost, and Natalie felt a little quiver of fear in her chest. Bridget looked nothing short of furious.

“I ran the household and balanced the accounts. I struggled to hold Father back and contain him. I raised Regina as her mother. I hired and fired servants. I planned parties and holidays.

“I ensured that proper tutors were found for all of us so that we might be accomplished. Your painting lessons. The pianoforte that we all learned. Elizabeth’s dancing lessons. All of it, I organized.

“You speak as though I have been sitting about all my life doing nothing. Did it not occur to you that perhaps I had a love? That I loved and was loved? And that I might have had to give it all up so that you might all be raised properly? So that the house would not sink into decay?”

“Father’s mistake is costing us all. But he would have forced all of you to do what you are doing now much sooner. Years sooner. If I had not been there holding back the tide.

“So do as you please, Natalie. Be as silly as you please. But do not ever accuse me of selfishness. Not when you have no idea what I’ve given up of myself for all of you.”

Natalie opened her mouth to speak but found that she had no words.

“You could have still taken care of us,” she said at last, meekly.

“No husband would let his wife be away from home tending her father and sisters,” Bridget replied. “Who would run his house for him?”

Natalie had to concede to that.

When a woman married, her job became running the household. Hopefully if the husband’s mother was alive and running his estate, she could teach her new daughter-in-law how things were done.

But what man would tolerate having to continue running his own home while his wife was still at her father’s? What man would go to live at the house of a father-in-law when he had an estate of his own?

And what man would be satisfied with no children while his wife raised her youngest sister and half-raised the other three?

No, Natalie could well understand why Bridget had to wait. She wondered what sweetheart Bridget might have had and lost.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She did feel sorry, which was unusual. Mostly it felt as though people wanted her to be sorry for no reason other than simply speaking the truth or something of that nature.

Bridget sighed. “I do not tell you all this to make you feel sorry for me. I tell you this so that you might think to look beyond yourself and what you want. You need to look at what other people need and want

as well.

“Otherwise, they will notice. People always do. And relationships are supposed to be a give and take. If you don’t pay attention to others, then eventually nobody will want to pay attention to you.”

Natalie nodded. She would have to do better. She understood.

Bridget seemed to sense her contrite mood, for she switched tactics. “You will have to find someone tonight. I have to speak to Louisa and Elizabeth to see how they fare. And of course, I will be choosing someone myself.

“That only leaves you to find someone. There are dozens of men here that we have yet to speak with. I will try and see if any of them are in need of a swift arrangement.”

“I feel as though I’m being sold off like cattle.”

“Good, I hope you do,” Bridget said, showing a little impatience. “It will serve you right to feel that way. You’ve had a month, Natalie. One would think that would be enough time. And yet.”

“You wouldn’t ever speak to Regina like this,” Natalie pointed out. “And I don’t see you making her marry.”

“The youngest sister getting married before her elder sisters? It would cause gossip,” Bridget replied. “Either people will say we are undesirable or they will say that Regina was in the family way.”

“You wouldn’t force her even if she was the middle child,” Natalie said. “She’s always been your favorite.”

“Regina would do what she knew was necessary to save the family,” Bridget replied. “I know that you think little of her. And she could do with a boost in confidence. But she cares for others and she thinks of something other than parties and idle gossip.”

“You make me sound vapid and shallow!” Natalie protested.

“I should hope so,” Bridget replied, her tone sharp.

Bridget’s tone rarely became sharp. The last month must have been a trial for her.

Natalie hadn't seen Bridget actively choosing between any suitors. While Natalie had been receiving men every few days, Bridget had yet to receive one.

However, Natalie had seen her sister often writing letters. Or, alternatively, writing a letter and then asking Father to copy the letter in his own writing.

Writing a letter to a man, as a woman, was something that was not done. Natalie could therefore only assume that Bridget was having Father extend an invitation of some kind to suitors, starting up a correspondence.

Then, through Father, Bridget could get to know her suitors and decide which one to choose.

This was all speculation. Natalie didn't know for certain. But given her sister's current state, she didn't really feel as though she would do any good by asking.

Choosing a suitor must have been hard for Bridget. But that didn't give her the right to talk to Natalie like that.

"I've been doing my best," Natalie told her. "Surely you've seen that."

"I've seen you drive away your chance at salvation again and again," Bridget said.

"If you and Elizabeth and Louisa are getting married, why should I have to?" Natalie pointed out.

"Louisa will only maintain her engagement if Mr. Fairchild agrees to stand by her. She still cannot marry while his aunt is alive. Only two of us married is not enough."

Bridget sighed and sank into a chair, looking exhausted. "Natalie. I want to guarantee your safety, that is all. If you were a man I should urge you into the Navy. You could earn honor and fortune there and perhaps someday buy our estate back from Lord Pettifer.

"But you are not a man. And so it is only marriage that can secure your future. You treat this as a game or something you can afford to laugh off. This is your future we are talking about.

“I can’t protect you. I would try, of course. But I can’t. And once the truth is known of how Father lost our estate, nobody will want to marry you. Not for a long time. Not, perhaps, for the rest of your life.

“And so if you are to avoid being an old maid you must do it now.”

Bridget looked up at her, and for a moment she looked much older. As though she were already middle-aged.

“This is the only way that I can take care of you, Natalie. Any of you.”

Natalie nodded. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful. She knew that Bridget was only thinking of their best interests.

She just didn’t appreciate also being viewed as selfish.

Bridget stood up with a sigh. “Come now. Our sisters will be here in a moment and we must be ready to greet them.”

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Saving Lady Abigail

Prologue

"I just don't understand how you could have done this without discussing it with me first," the Earl of Gilchrist said to his only son.

"I am twenty-six years of age, Father; I don't need your permission to purchase a commission," Lord Colton Frasier, the Viscount Dunthorpe, responded.

"But how could you have possibly purchased a lieutenant's commission on the allowance given? I understand that it would normally be rather sufficient, but you so often spend yours at the gentlemen's club or on races."

Lord Gilchrist was not the type of man to be angered or raise his voice. The most emotion he ever showed to others was the furrowing of his soft blonde brows and declarations of the impossibility of an action he didn't agree with.

"As you said, Father, my allowance is sufficient. I have grown bored with both the tables and the races. I want to experience some of life. I would have thought I chose a noble course."

"Noble? Are you not aware that we are in the midst of a war with Napoleon? What is so noble about my only son dying on the battlefield?"

The Viscount softened his demeanor. He certainly knew this announcement to his father would stir up mixed emotions. He had yet to tell his sister or mother. Lord Dunthorpe would have liked to at least have his father on his side before that time came.

"I am aware of the battle, Father. I can assure you that as a lieutenant, and with an earldom in my future, I will be sure to take the proper precautions necessary."

Lord Dunthorpe got up from his leather seat and paced his father's office.

"I want to see some of the world, Father," he said, waving his arms around him. "I want to have experiences and adventures. It is not fair that such things should be taken from me purely because I am your only son. Had you another son, it would not have mattered what adventures I wished to embrace."

"But you are my only son, and very dear to me for that matter," his father retorted, still seated behind his desk.

Lord Gilchrist knew his son was a spirited man, always hungry for the next excitement. He somewhat wished he was more like his sister, Lady Louisa. She was perpetually quiet and reserved. Where Lord Dunthorpe jumped before he thought, Lady Louisa always profoundly considered before she even spoke.

"I suppose what is done is done," Lord Gilchrist said, laying his weathered hands upon the oak desk in front of him. "I will never say I agree with this choice but, as you said, you are a grown man and able to make your own decisions."

Lord Dunthorpe sat down in relief. Perhaps with his father now surrendered to his choice it would be easier to tell the rest of the household.

"I thought perhaps that I might announce it to Mother and Louisa this evening at dinner."

"Why so soon?"

"I leave at the end of the week, Father. There is a great need at this time for willing and capable men."

Lord Gilchrist gave out a long sigh. He would have rather liked some time to adjust to his son's new course in life.

In all honesty, Lord Gilchrist rather hoped that Colton would be forced to consider the choice he made before going straight into it. So often, his only son was prone to making rash decisions, but he would soon see rational reason if given the time.

"I suppose you hoped that with coming here and telling me first in private, I might ease the blow to the others," Lord Gilchrist said with a shuffling of papers on his desk. "I cannot promise that will be the case."

"But think of Mother," Lord Dunthorpe said with an ease of charming manipulation. "She will be so frightened at the prospect. If you support me, she will be assured that it is safe. I would ask for your agreement only for the sake of her nerves."

"You are using the delicate nature of a lady to support your own devilish devices, and I don't think I particularly like that," Lord Gilchrist retorted.

He softened into a smile, however. There was much of himself he saw in his son.

"But because I do care so dearly for your mother and her constitution, I will give in to your demands."

Lord Dunthorpe eased into a smile. He had overcome his first hurdle. With his father now on his side, the next would be much easier.

Lord Dunthorpe was well aware that his father, and no doubt the rest of his family, would see his choice to join the Regulars as a rash decision. He, on the other hand, found it to be the most promising course of action he had ever taken in the whole of his life.

He knew that soon the time would come for him to have to settle down, take a wife, and continue the legacy of his father's earldom. He had enjoyed the prospects of the peerage and the social discretions that came with it.

He was now finding himself a grown man, no longer enamored of the artless pleasure of a gentleman's life. He wanted to have some importance attached to his life. The constant revolutions of seasons at his family's country estates no longer seemed worthwhile or meaningful in Colton's mind.

That evening at dinner, Lord Dunthorpe tried his best to be a perfect son for the sake of his mother. Anything to help ease the blow he was about to give was worth the sacrifice.

“Mother, I have just received a letter from Isabella. I can scarcely believe the words she wrote,” Lady Louisa Frasier said to her mother across the dinner table.

“Oh, does that mean she has given birth? Do tell me quickly! Are both Isabella and the babe doing well?”

“Well,” Lady Louisa said, not usually the one excited to be in the limelight. Her news, however, was just so fantastical that it made her forget her normally timid demeanor. “She told me first that everything went wonderfully and that she is recovering very quickly.

“She also reported that not only did she have a healthy baby boy,” Lady Louisa paused for dramatic effect, “but also a beautiful baby girl.”

The Countess of Gilchrist raised both hands to her face in shock.

“Twins?”

Lady Louisa nodded in the affirmative.

“She also inquired if we all might be able to visit her at Wintercrest Manor at our earliest convenience. Won’t that be wonderful to go and see both beautiful babies?”

“How very exciting. We will have to find the time to go before the winter storms settle in. It is already very near to autumn.”

“I am sure she would be more than happy if we stayed the whole holiday season through,” Lady Louisa added.

“What do you think, Lord Gilchrist? Shall we all go up north to see the Duke and Duchess’s new babies?”

Lady Gilchrist turned to her husband at the other end of the table. His eyes flickered on each member seated before saying anything.

“I think it would be a lovely diversion to spend the holidays up north,” Lord Gilchrist agreed.

The Frasier household rarely left their London home, all finding it to be comfortable and inviting. From time to time, as it suited their fancies, they would spend short occasions at their country seat. It was

along the western coast of the country and boasted beautiful views of the Bristol Channel very near to the fashionable retreat town of Bath.

“Colton, you must come with us too,” Lady Louisa said, turning to her brother. “I know you and the Duke of Wintercrest got on very well. He will no doubt be most happy to have your company.”

Both Lord Dunthorpe and his father exchanged a nervous look. This was no doubt the right window of opportunity for Lord Dunthorpe to tell his sister and mother of his alternate future to that of Wintercrest Manor.

“It seems like a charming diversion, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to join you,” Lord Dunthorpe said, doing his best to ease into his own arrangement.

“Why ever not?” Lady Louisa asked, raising one of her mousey brows as she lifted some cured ham casually to her mouth.

“I am afraid I have my own announcement to make. The cause of it will keep me detained for quite some time.”

“Don’t tell me you bought another racing horse,” Lady Gilchrist chimed in. “The last one you got, you spent a whole year with the trainers and we scarcely ever saw you.”

Lord Dunthorpe recalled with fondness that particular diversion a few years back. He had grown tired of just watching the gig races and wanted to try his hand at it himself.

Lord Dunthorpe was never one to do something halfway. For that reason, he searched the whole country over for the most outstanding racing horse stock and the fastest gig. Then he spent every waking moment training with his horse and buggy.

He had to admit it did pay off in the end. He had won almost every race. It was entertaining at first. However, winning continually quickly soured Lord Dunthorpe’s taste for racing. What was the point if there was no fear of losing?

“I have not purchased a horse. In fact, I can promise you that I won’t even be attending any races for quite some time. I have bought a commission.”

He looked back and forth between his sister and mother. Poor Lady Louisa held a boiled potato mid-air, with her mouth agape, unable to move.

"I don't understand," Lady Gilchrist finally said.

It was enough to wake her daughter and Lady Louisa set down her fork, suddenly put off her meal.

"I will be joining the Regulars, Mother. I have bought a lieutenant's commission and will be doing what is necessary for king and crown."

Lord Dunthorpe couldn't help but hold his head up high as he said these words. It was not for pride, but to show that he was confident in his choice.

"Did you know about this, Lord Gilchrist?" the Countess asked, turning significantly pale as she faced her husband.

"He informed me earlier this afternoon in my office, my dear."

"And you are in agreement with it?" she struggled out.

The Earl of Gilchrist looked between his wife and son. He would not lie for one, nor would he willingly bring more unease than necessary on the other.

"I am settled to the fact. Colton is old enough to do what he wishes with his own life. If this is the course he chooses, I will not stand in his way."

"But Colton," Lady Gilchrist said, with a visible shake to her voice, "what of the danger?"

"I promise I will be very considerate of my actions, Mother."

Lady Gilchrist promptly excused herself from the table, too overcome with emotion to stay much longer.

The room was silent as she left. Soon after, Lord Gilchrist went to console his wife. This left the two siblings alone in the dining room.

"You are very set on this, then?" Lady Louisa finally asked.

Colton felt his first pang of regret. Their whole lives, Colton had made

it his mission to take care of and protect his younger sister. She was not only younger than him, but of a very meek nature. Between this and her moderately plain-featured looks, she had often been an easy target for a cruel miss.

“I am very set on this,” he said softly.

“Then you will promise to write me often?”

Lord Dunthorpe and Lady Louisa may have had a few years of age between them, but they were still very close siblings. Lady Louisa had counted on him on a number of occasions to be her champion in times of distress. Not only that, but he had also brought much light and laughter to what might otherwise have been a very dull life for her.

“Of course I will,” Lord Dunthorpe said, reaching across the table and taking his sister's hand. “Every day, if you wish it. So much, in fact, it will be as if I am still here and you wish me gone.”

Lady Louisa gave a soft smile of relief at this promise. She had been at her brother's side so much of her life, she feared how she would go on with him away. What brought an even colder shudder to her was the thought that this endeavor might result in losing her brother permanently.

"James, you little rascal. Where are you hiding?" Jackie called out down the long hall of Wintercrest Manor.

She took her slippered steps very carefully with her little cousin, Elisabeth, holding her hand. They paused for a moment, as Jackie was sure she heard a giggle.

Sure enough, the sound came again. It was the soft laughter of a three-year-old who couldn't contain himself. Elisabeth gave her own toddler laugh in reply, covering her mouth with her free cherubic hand.

"We've caught them now," Jackie said to her partner.

Jackie slid open the door to what seemed like an empty bedroom. She could, however, hear the rustle of bedding.

Jackie put a finger to her lips and pointed under the bed for Elisabeth's benefit. They both snuck over and got down on their knees before the long bed covering.

With a swift movement, Jackie lifted the bedding to reveal Elisabeth's twin brother hiding under the bed.

"Got you!" Elisabeth called out to him.

"Where is Aunt Abigail?" Jackie asked as she helped pull the three-year-old from under the bed.

It wasn't a room that was often used, and his clothes and dark hair were now covered in a light coating of dust.

James promptly sneezed as Jackie attempted to brush it off. Mrs. Murray wasn't one to rise to a temper, but she would be very unhappy to see the boy in such a state.

Elisabeth decided to search the room as Jackie did her best to brush

her brother off. She knew her Aunt Abigail couldn't be far away from her hide-and-seek partner.

"Found you, too," Elisabeth called out as she poked behind a privacy screen.

There, she did find her Aunt Abigail, much too old for silly games, but still happily playing with her two nieces and nephew.

"Oh, dear. I thought I really had you fooled that time," Lady Abigail Grant said as she was led by the hand from behind the curtain.

"Aunt Abigail couldn't fit under the bed," James said with a giggle.

"I could so fit," Lady Abigail retorted with a hand on her hip. "I just didn't want to get all dusty like you."

The children all happily laughed with their aunt before she returned them all to the nursery. It would soon be time for Lady Abigail to dress for dinner.

"May I come down with you too, tonight?" Jackie asked.

"I am afraid not. We are to have Captain Jones and a few of his officers from the militia with us tonight."

"But I am almost twelve years old. Certainly that is old enough," Jackie retorted.

Lady Abigail knew that her niece was now at that age where she no longer wanted to be treated as a child left in the nursery. She had struggled with the same frustrations as a young girl.

"I know it doesn't seem fair now, but you would not want to come anyway. "Captain Jones is an ancient, very boring man. I fear you would fall asleep during your first course and never want to come to dinner again," Lady Abigail added, trying to make it seem less enticing.

"I don't care, I still want to go," Jackie grumbled.

"I know, my dear. Very soon you will and wish you didn't have to."

Lady Abigail would have been more than happy to stay the night in the nursery with the twins and let Jackie go in her place. Not only was

Captain Jones incredibly unentertaining, he was also very long-winded.

It was going to be a very long night of pretending to be interested. Lady Abigail's only hope was that at least one of the three lieutenants that would be joining the captain would be of some interest.

Lady Abigail was now nineteen years old and of a marrying age. She thought the prospect of finding a gentleman who would interest her very unlikely. They all wanted a quiet, prim, proper lady. That was not Abigail at all.

She much rather fancied the idea of marrying an officer instead. Though he might not have been one of the peerages, he was undoubtedly considered a gentleman. Men of this social standing would also be less likely to be put off by a less than gentle manner.

Lady Abigail had of course been bred to be an entirely proper lady by her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Wintercrest. They also had, however, given her the freedom to grow into her own personality.

Lady Abigail hoped to marry someday. She wished to find that love that seemed to defy any barricades of social standards, as her brother, the current Duke of Wintercrest, had done when he first met his wife, Isabella.

She, however, did not want to marry solely because social graces dictated that she do so. If she did marry, she had long ago determined it would be someone she loved dearly and who would care for her just as she would them.

Sadly, Lady Abigail was sorely disappointed with the night's dinner guests. Captain Jones had brought three of his lieutenants and a colonel. The colonel was much too old for Lady Abigail's liking, two of the three lieutenants were already married, and the third betrothed.

Lady Abigail half wondered if her brother had purposefully only invited the otherwise unavailable to dinner that night.

The duke often had the high-ranking officers from the militia come to dinner when they were in the area. It was an important gesture for him to give, but it also allowed nostalgia for his own days in the Royal

Navy.

The duke was aware that Abigail was now of the age when courtships became pressing and engagements were on the horizon. He rather overprotected her when it came to opportunities of meeting gentlemen.

“You know he did it on purpose,” Lady Abigail said softly to her sister-in-law after dinner.

The whole party was now seated in the drawing room. The men were by the fire talking politics while Lady Abigail, Isabella, the Duchess of Wintercrest, and the dowager duchess played a game of cards.

“I am quite certain he did do it on purpose,” the duchess agreed.

“What a rotten thing it is to do,” Lady Abigail said, setting down her cards rather exaggeratedly.

“What is it you two are whispering about?” Lady Abigail’s mother asked over her own hand of cards.

The dowager duchess was now deteriorating quickly in her older age. Lady Abigail suspected, with the loss of her husband a few years back, her mother had since lost much of the light in her life.

Lady Abigail’s parents could not have been more opposite creatures. Not only were they different in manners and personality, but there was a very vast age difference. For an outsider to look in on their marriage, it would have been assumed the arrangement was made for practical purposes.

It was well known, however, by all the late duke and dowager duchess’s children that their parents did, in fact, have a deep affection for each other.

“Abigail is not very happy to see that the gentlemen invited tonight are not of her preference,” the duchess explained to her mother-in-law.

“Your brother hopes better for you than a common militiaman,” Lady Abigail’s mother explained.

Lady Abigail didn't like this response, nor did she look forward to the idea of her overly protective brother choosing dinner guests in the future.

"Don't worry," the duchess said, taking her sister-in-law's hand and patting it softly. "Soon, the season will be upon us. You will have more suitors than you know what to do with."

It was an accurate statement that, due to Lady Abigail's beauty, she caught the eye of many potential suitors during her time in London each year. What was upsetting to her was that, so far, no one had caught her eye in return.

Lady Abigail brushed a rust-colored ringlet back from her shoulder. It was an act of irritation that both the duchess and Lady Abigail's mother knew well.

"I have to say, I am surprised that His Grace is allowing you to go at all," Lady Abigail said with emphasis on her brother's proper title.

The duchess patted her belly that was beginning to show the swell of life beneath.

"I have plenty of time before this little one comes. I have been away from London for so long, I could not bear to spend another season away. And as for the duke," she said with a raised brow, "I did not ask. I merely announced my intentions."

All three ladies laughed at this. They had become quite a close trio with all the time they had spent together over the last four years.

Though up until now the duchess had chosen to stay home with her young children, Lady Abigail and her mother had still attended the season at their lavish city house. They always came home in time to spend the remainder of the year with the duke, duchess, their ever-growing family, and the late Lord James Grant's daughter, Jaqueline De'belmount.

"You will give my best to my sister, won't you?" Lady Abigail's mother asked after they all contained their rather girlish giggles.

"Of course I will," Lady Abigail assured her mother.

Lady Abigail rather looked forward to her time each year in London, less for the prospects and more for time with her favorite cousin, Lady Fortuna Rosh. She dearly loved this extension of her family and, in times past, had spent many weeks visiting with her uncle and aunt, the Marquess and Marchioness of Huntington.

"I do wish you would come though, Mother," Lady Abigail added.

"I am not feeling at all up to it this year. Plus, with all three of my grandchildren staying here at Wintercrest, I dare say I will be much happier to have them about than the ladies of the town."

"I must confess, I am happy to have you here with them too," the duchess added. "It will be my first time away from the twins. I didn't think I could do it but knowing you will be with them brings me comfort."

"Remember you said that, my dear, for when you return, you may find them entirely spoiled," Lady Abigail's mother said with a happy glow around her aging face.

Lady Abigail couldn't help but notice that, despite the wrinkles that now curled around her brown eyes and the large amounts of silver hair that glowed in the light of candles, her mother was still a gorgeous woman.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go,” the duke said the following night as the whole household sat around the fire.

“Don’t worry, my love,” the duchess reassured her husband. “I will be able to go to town and return home at the end of the season all before this little one is even ready to come out.”

“But the twins came early. What if that happens again?”

“It has only been two months since we discovered the pregnancy. I can’t imagine that this child will make its debut so vastly early as to arrive in London.”

“Still, all this traveling in your condition makes me nervous,” the duke said, taking his wife’s hand and kissing it gently.

“I don’t want to go to town just for myself, but also for Abigail. With your mother not feeling up to it this year, she will need a chaperone.”

“I can be her chaperone,” the duke retorted.

Isabella had to smile at this idea. Protecting Lady Abigail from having her brother as her chaperone was what she had meant. She loved her husband dearly, but he was far too protective of his younger sister.

Not to mention the fact that there would be many instances where Lady Abigail would be in need of a female chaperone to make her way among afternoon parties with other ladies. Finding your place was just as much dependent on these social gatherings as the more commonly thought of balls and large evening events.

“I think it will be more to her comfort if I am there with her,” the duchess tried to explain as efficiently as possible to her husband.

She watched the fire glow reflected off his red hair as he swiveled his

look from his wife on the couch to his sister sitting at a distant table with the twins. His angular face darkened as he tried to make sense of her meaning.

“I am not that horrible,” he said once all the lines connected in his head.

“My love, were you not there at last night’s dinner party? Could you not have invited at least one gentleman for Abigail to have found even an ounce of interest in?”

“She is far too good for a militiaman,” the duke retorted.

“I didn’t mean for her to marry, though I would be happy for her no matter what vocation the person she chooses to marry has. She is young and in want of some excitement. I fear, with just you taking her to London, her whole season would be much like that dinner party.”

“It’s just hard for me. She is my little sister, after all.”

“I know,” the duchess said softly, touching her husband’s cheek. “I fear the day that Elisabeth comes of age. Even Jackie, for that matter,” Isabella added with a smile.

The duke looked at the whole of his family in the drawing room. Though Jackie was his niece, he had treated her as if she was his own daughter and not just his ward to take care of. He could scarcely imagine his own behavior when the time came for either Jackie or his darling little Elisabeth.

Lady Abigail couldn’t help but sneak a peek at her brother and his wife as they spoke on the couch by the fire. Though their relationship had begun on unsure waters, it had blossomed into something wonderful.

As Isabella ran a soft hand along her husband’s face, Lady Abigail felt that pang of wistfulness deep inside her heart. She wondered if she, too, would ever find someone that she could look upon with such love and admiration as her sister-in-law did on her brother.

“Lord James, Lady Elisabeth,” the children’s governess, Miss Smith, called from her seat. “It is just about time to retire to bed.”

The announcement woke Lady Abigail from her wishful thinking. Her young niece and nephew's governess was a very time efficient lady. Everything seemed to run on an exact schedule.

Lady Abigail expected it was a necessity when dealing with two children of the same age. Not only did that mean double the mischief, but they also seemed to have a unique connection between them that often led to more trouble.

Miss Smith had taken over the task of educating Miss Jackie after the previous governess had found a better situation. That, of course, was the Duchess of Wintercrest. Though the twins were still too young for formal education, Miss Smith had happily taken on the task of including them whenever possible.

"Aunt Abigail, will you read to us before we have to go to bed?" James asked in his sweet voice.

Lady Abigail saw that Elisabeth already had a book in hand for her to read to them.

"We only have but a moment. I would hate to make Miss Smith cross," Lady Abigail said, taking the book from the little hand.

"Do come read it over here, so we may all hear it," Lady Abigail's mother called from her seat close to the fire.

Lady Abigail did as she was bid. With a child on either side, she walked over and sat before the fire.

Jackie, too, who was at first playing the piano, also stopped to come and listen. She happily took the spot next to her grandmother.

Sitting on the floor near the warm glow of the fire, Lady Abigail began to read. It was an enjoyable pastime that the family participated in each night.

The twins, and even Jackie, though she felt herself now too old to admit it, loved when Lady Abigail read to them.

She always did it with the most animated of voices and emotions that it quite nearly brought the stories right off the pages of the book.

By the end of the week, matters between the duke and duchess were

all settled and the pair, along with Lady Abigail, were setting out on the long journey to town.

The duchess tried her best to hide her tears as she kissed her children goodbye. Though it might have been a very usual thing for a duchess to leave her children to see to social duties, it was not something Isabella did.

Of course, though the duchess knew that her children would be more than well cared for in the hands of her mother-in-law and Jackie, she was still torn by the thought of leaving them. The added emotions that came with her pregnancy didn't seem to help the matter much.

"I received a letter from Fortuna yesterday," Lady Abigail said once they were all seated in the carriage and away down the road.

Lady Abigail hoped that some exciting conversation might help distract her sister-in-law from her sorrowful feelings.

"How lovely," the duchess said, doing her best to put on a brave face. "Did she have anything of interest to say?"

Isabella was happy for the distraction, just as much as Lady Abigail was for giving it.

"They have already arrived in London. With the weather being so warm, they went early this year."

The duke and duchess both looked out their windows at this, almost to confirm that it was, in fact, unusually warm for the time of year.

"Aunt Amelia has invited us all over for dinner at our earliest convenience."

"That was very kind of her," Isabella responded. "I have been looking forward to meeting these relations that I have heard so much about over the years."

"You will really like Fortuna, I think," Lady Abigail continued, now falling into an ease of conversation. "She is very much like Lady Louisa."

"How so?" the duchess asked, intrigued.

They spent the remainder of the day describing every last detail of the relatives Isabella was soon to meet. The duchess was always happy to meet the family of her husband, as she was very limited in her own.

Lady Louisa Frasier and her family had often taken Isabella under their wing as her only family, since her father, the Baron Leinster, had often been away attending to business before his passing. The Frasieres were the closest thing that Isabella had ever had to family dynamics.

When she and the duke had married, she was joyful to find that she was welcomed with open arms into not just his heart, but the whole of his household and family.

“Perhaps we should plan our own event,” Lady Abigail said, after a time. “We could invite Lord and Lady Gilchrist, as well as our aunt and uncle. I think we would all get on as such a happy party.”

“I think that would be a splendid idea,” the duchess agreed.

“It seems to me,” interjected the duke, who, for the most part, had kept to observing the scenery as they went along the road, “that it might be a lot of work for someone who promised to take it easy.”

The duchess waved him off as a silly man.

“It will give me something to occupy my mind with.”

For the next three days, as the trio traveled from the estate up north to the prestigious house in London, Lady Abigail and the duchess were hard at work making plans for a beautiful dinner party.

Arriving, finally, at their destination, both women could honestly say they would be happy never to sit in another carriage again. They made their way into the home already opened and prepared for their arrival, ready for a peaceful day of relaxation and recuperation.

“Perhaps both you ladies should retire early for the night,” the duke said as the carriage arrived at the house at dusk.

“I promised Louisa I would send her a note as soon as I got here.”

The duke didn’t like his wife’s answer to his suggestion, but allowed it nonetheless. He therefore had some tea brought into the evening sitting room so she could write her letter and regain some energy from

the refreshments.

“I thought I might call on my aunt tomorrow,” Lady Abigail said between sips of tea. “I’m sure she would be happy to see you, Christian, and meet you, Isabella, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Well, I think after talking about them for three days, I can’t bear to go much longer without meeting them,” Isabella said as she finished her letter and folded it for a servant to deliver.

Normally Isabella would have just waited to put it with the post, but since Lady Louisa seemed most anxious to know that Isabella was safely in London, she thought it best to have it taken to the Frasier household right away.

“And perhaps we could take a walk around the park, too,” Lady Abigail added.

“Perhaps it’s best to stick to one event at a time,” the duke admonished.

“You’re a ball of fun,” his sister retorted back in a teasing fashion.

“Yes, well you know how much your brother loves to spend the season in town,” the duchess added to the jeering.

“Well, I would guess that you just want to catch the next gig race,” the duke retorted to his sister with a raised red brow. “I am not at all certain that it’s a very good idea for you.”

“Why, because ladies should be abashed by such behavior?” Lady Abigail retorted.

“No, because I fear you might climb into one and show them all up. Then I would have to write to Mother and explain why her daughter is now a pariah.”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you?” the duchess asked Lady Abigail.

It was not at all shocking to hear that Lady Abigail wanted to attend a race, but to be a part of one seemed like an even more drastic line to cross than she could imagine for her sister-in-law.

“I may have done it, once before. But that was at Fortuna’s house and

in a basket, not a gig,” Lady Abigail corrected her brother.

“Yes, well, things are different when you are in London. You are also a very prestigious member of the town, whether you want it or not, and that comes with more judgmental appraisals.”

“This is not my first time, Christian. I am well aware of the conduct I must follow.”

“ I don’t think you do fully understand,” the duke retorted. He should have uttered it in a reprimanding tone, but instead, he wore a smirk of pride.

The duke detested the time in town because, unlike his sister who still had a bit of leeway to enjoy herself, he had to act exactly as expected of someone of his social status.

“Do try not to make too big a spectacle of yourself this year, Abigail,” the duke finally sighed.

“Of course not, dear brother. Plus, Isabella will keep me in line, won't you?”

It was right that, of the trio, the duchess was the one most keen to sensibility and propriety. She sincerely hoped that she could instill some of those values in Lady Abigail without disrupting her free spirit too much.

Lady Abigail couldn't have been more excited to see her cousin. Though it had scarcely been a year since seeing Lady Fortuna Rosh last, it still seemed too long to Lady Abigail.

The two cousins had grown up as close friends since childhood. There was not much that happened to one that the other did not know about.

The Duchess of Wintercrest was a little nervous to meet the family she had heard such great praise about, from both Lady Abigail and her husband.

"Oh, Abigail, I've missed you so," Lady Huntington said as she hugged her niece. "And Christian, look at you," she added, raising a hand to a plump, rosy cheek at the appearance of her nephew. "You have grown into quite a man. How long has it been?"

The duke happily took his aunt's hand and kissed it lovingly. Lady Huntington blushed an even more profound crimson as the small ringlets encircling her face shook with her giggles.

"And Your Grace, of course, it is lovely to finally make your acquaintance," Lady Huntington said as the duke introduced his wife.

"I must confess, poor Isabella must feel as if she knows you already, dear aunt," Lady Abigail said as they all entered the home and came to sit in the morning room. "I about chewed her ear off the whole way from Wintercrest."

"Where is Fortuna?" Lady Abigail asked when her cousin did not greet her or appear in the sitting room.

"She went out already this morning. It was a little early if you ask me, but she insisted on going with Josie to pick out the fabric."

“Fabric for what?” Lady Abigail asked as she took a seat on a mint-colored couch.

The whole room was decorated in a soft green color with gold accents all around. Between that and the excellent light coming in through the window, it gave the room an air of freshness that would brighten even the saddest of moods.

“I will have to let her tell you. She is quite excited about it,” Lady Huntington said before beginning to pour the tea set before them.

Lady Abigail enjoyed the company of her aunt as she drank her delicate morning tea and ate moist muffins. The whole party, including her brother, seemed utterly at ease as they shared stories of memories from the past.

Lady Abigail was just picking at a loose thread coming off the embroidered cuff of her morning dress and wondering where her cousin could be when Lady Fortuna finally returned home.

Immediately, Lady Abigail rose to greet her cousin, forgetting all about the rose-colored cuff. It also didn’t escape her eye that behind Lady Fortuna’s entrance into the party was a maid heavily weighed down with a massive amount of fabric.

“Now, before you do anything,” Lady Abigail said after new introductions were made between the duchess and Lady Fortuna, “you must enlighten me on your mysterious morning endeavors.”

Lady Fortuna, who sat perfectly next to her mother, looked more akin to a china doll than lady. She seemed far too fragile to be traveling about in early morning dew.

She was always one to think things through before speaking, so instead of starting right in, as Lady Abigail might have done, she instead smoothed the folds of her cream morning dress as she collected her thoughts.

As Lady Abigail waited, she wondered over the color of her cousin's dress. It somewhat made her look more pale and fragile. She thought to perhaps tell Lady Fortuna that cream was not a preferable color for her. Certainly, a soft blue would do better to bring out the little color

in her cheeks and azure color of her cousin's eyes.

“Well, upon arriving in London last week, I was determined to find a good use of my time. While at home, I have been very fortunate to have a large amount of work for myself, under the request of Reverend Brown, attending to the needs of our local girls' school.”

She took a deep breath of air. Lady Abigail couldn't help but wonder why her cousin always looked about to faint from weariness when she knew Lady Fortuna to be a lady of many talents and busy hands.

“He recommended, before our leaving for town, that I get in touch with a very good friend of his, a Mr. Thomas Bloomsbury. Mr. Bloomsbury is a rector at the Foundling Hospital here in London.”

Lady Abigail was familiar with the Foundling Hospital. It was a place for children whose parents had, unfortunately, had to surrender them. The hospice was used to care for the children, as well as give them a good education and means for apprenticeship when they came of age.

It had already been around for several decades and had received not only high praise for its work but had also been replicated a few times in different areas of the country since.

“Mr. Brown informed me that his friend was concerned about the constant need at the hospital. They have more children than required funds for the necessary provisions.”

Lady Abigail knew that helping less fortunate children was very dear to her cousin's heart. She had been given the Christian name Fortuna because she had been a miracle in her parents' lives. For many years they had tried unsuccessfully to have children, and then when they were finally able, their plans seemed destined for heartache and pain.

They buried four of Lady Fortuna's siblings before she was born. With her sickly demeanor, they had expected her to go the way of all her predecessors. Lady Fortuna had grown and thrived, however. Her parents instilled in her the deep gratitude of her survival.

For Lady Fortuna, this gratitude showed in her constant willingness to help all other children as much as she could. She felt that if she were able to help one sick child get better, or perhaps give one

impooverished child a better start in life, she would be doing the work that God had preserved her for.

“I wrote to Mr. Bloomsbury and asked to help in any way they needed. I met with him and toured the hospital. He explained to me that, more often than not, the funds they receive go to clothing and bedding, making it difficult for them to buy supplies for educational purposes. He wondered if I might be willing to donate clothing and the like so that their funds could be used for a better cause.”

“Which explains the need to go to the fabric store so early in the morning and to burden your maid so heavily,” the duke said with a teasing smile.

“I thought perhaps I could start with making nightgowns, uniforms, pinafores, and bonnets for the children. They are also in need of proper bedding and winter garments.”

“That is quite a tall order for just beginning,” Lady Abigail said. She often feared her cousin took on more than she was able to adequately cope with.

“Well, I rather hoped to start a sewing group. This is where I was hoping you could help me, Abigail,” Lady Fortuna continued. “You are so good at making friends. I hoped you would help me organize a group of ladies to meet a few times a week.”

“Well, I have your first candidate right here,” Lady Abigail said, pointing to the duchess. “I have never seen anyone embroider as finely as Isabella.”

“I would love to join if you would have me. The idea sounds wonderful,” Isabella agreed.

“Oh, Your Grace, I would appreciate that very much if you would be willing.”

“I also might suggest another addition if you would let me,” the duchess continued.

Lady Fortuna nodded in encouragement.

“My friend Lady Louisa Frasier is a very talented seamstress. I am sure

she too would be happy to join your worthy cause.”

“Oh, this is so exciting,” Lady Fortuna said, clapping her hands with delight. “To already have so many potential ladies, I do not doubt that we will make a wonderful improvement to the Foundling Hospital and its residents.”

“Well, just two besides yourself,” the duke said with a little laugh.

“Three you mean, dear cousin,” Lady Fortuna countered. “There is your lovely wife, possibly her friend, and Abigail, of course.”

The duke struggled to hold back his laughter.

“Oh, Fortuna, I would be happy to rally to your cause, but you know I have no ability when it comes to sewing. I am dreadful at it, in fact.”

“I know it isn’t your strong suit,” Lady Fortuna said, always trying to see the light through the clouds. “I thought perhaps we could just start you on something very simple like the bedding or pinafores.”

“Oh, yes, Abigail. That would be easy enough,” the duchess added encouragingly. “You could make the pinafores; it’s just a simple stitch. Then when you are done, I could embellish them just a little to give each girl her own special pattern.”

“Maybe you should have Abigail start with a handkerchief instead. That way if it goes wrong, at least it will spend most of its time in a pocket or up a sleeve,” the duke said with a hearty laugh.

Lady Abigail gave her teasing brother a pointed look. She knew Christian meant his words all in good fun. To be completely honest with herself, she partly agreed with him. But Lady Abigail also was not one to shy away from a challenge.

So often, Lady Abigail found sewing and embroidery too dull to catch her attention for very long. She would much rather be out and about exploring the beautiful earth.

She was sure the image of children wearing comfortable, warm clothes and having the tools necessary for their education would be more than sufficient inspiration to put her whole focus to the task.

“I would be more than happy to help,” Lady Abigail said, wrinkling

her freckled nose at her brother.

As decided earlier, on the way home from their aunt's house, the party paused to take a ride around the very popular Hyde Park. It didn't escape the duke's attention that his sister's whole intent behind this diversion was not to be seen as most fine ladies wished, but instead to peek her own glance at the notorious activity.

"Come now, let your sister have some enjoyment," Isabella said to her husband when he seemed to be steering their open carriage completely clear of the route.

What had once been the King's private road was now more commonly used by daring gentlemen in gigs with fast horses.

"It is not as if she is asking to witness dueling. You, yourself, told me that on occasion you drove your witnessed races along that course. Do not deprive her of a small amount of fun."

The duke seemed to roll this over in his mind, before finally turning down the desired path. With any luck, no one would be there. It was, after all, just starting to be the fashionable time for turns around the park. More often, races occurred toward the end of night.

Much to the duke's disappointment, and his sister's excitement, there was, in fact, a group of gentlemen preparing for a friendly race.

Lady Abigail sat up immediately in her spot to scan the crowd for familiar faces. She was acquainted with several of the ladies who stood off to the side as the gentlemen prepared their steeds.

Lady Abigail was happy to see that the race at that moment would be between three men on horseback. She found this to be far more exciting than gig races.

Without hesitation, she hopped down from the carriage and made her

way over to some familiar ladies.

“This seems like it will be quite the exciting event,” Miss Mary Johansson said after Lady Abigail made her introductions and inquiries to friends since last they met.

Miss Mary was the daughter of a Baron who had not much more than the title to his name. She was, however, a beauty in the extreme and Lady Abigail did not doubt that she would marry up in life.

Though they were not entirely close friends, they were, however, acquaintances that often frequented the same groups and less than desirable events for ladies such as this.

Lady Abigail looked over the riders. Two she knew well. They were usual contestants here on the King's private road. Though they had long since outgrown the age of young pups, they still seemed to wish to prove themselves.

The third rider was a man she had never seen before. She couldn't help but let her eyes linger on him as he checked his saddle and the condition of his horse.

He was dressed very finely in a velvet riding jacket and matching brown trousers. His high boots looked to be of excellent black leather, and the crop in his hand was held with an air of confidence.

“Who is that gentleman in the middle? I don't think I have ever made his acquaintance.”

“Why, that is Lord Franklin Stuartson, Earl of Heshing, Lady Abigail,” Miss Mary instructed, happy to have a bit of information to dole out.

“Heshing,” Lady Abigail thought the name over. It did have a bit of familiarity to it.

“I believe this is one of his first seasons in town. He has just taken his father's seat in the House of Lords this year.”

Lady Abigail figured the name was only familiar to her by way of passing word from her father or brother. She took a mental note to perhaps ask the duke about the gentleman when he was slightly less of a vexing older brother.

The riders mounted their steeds and prepared for the long stretch of road ahead of them. The small crowd clapped in excitement.

“Have you placed a bet?” Miss Mary asked, motioning to Lord Fenton, who was the usual orchestrator of such events.

Lady Abigail looked over at her brother. He had just finished helping Isabella down from the carriage and together they were making their way over. Had she been here without him, she would have happily placed a sixpence on Lord Heshing.

It was not at all proper for ladies to witness such events, let alone bet on them. She decided it was best, with her brother present, not to do so.

Lady Abigail couldn't help but notice the gasp and whispers that surrounded her brother as he escorted his wife over to witness the race. It made more sense to her now why he had been so uptight over the course of their trip. People undoubtedly thought differently of him now that he was the Duke of Wintercrest.

“I have never seen one of these before,” the duchess said, coming to Lady Abigail's side. “It does seem rather exciting.”

She leaned closer to Lady Abigail's ear, “Don't tell Christian, but I put a bet on the chestnut mare.”

Lady Abigail looked at her sister-in-law with shock. The Duchess of Wintercrest, for the most part, was a very proper lady. It was no surprise that this was her first race, but slightly scandalous that she had placed a bet.

Lady Abigail looked over the chestnut mare and rider. It was Lord Heshing, spoken of before. She certainly hoped he won and told herself it was for the reason of the duchess's bet.

Within a flash, the race was on, and the three men went speeding down the road. The goal of the race was to travel the whole length, turning just before Kensington Gardens, and making the full length back. The first rider to cross the line drawn at the start would be the winner.

Not only would he have the pride of winning the race, but he would

also get to take home his companions' steeds.

For many gentlemen, the time-consuming act of training, purchasing well-bred horses, and racing was merely to pass the time. For a select few, such as Mr. Shawn James, second son to Viscount Sheffield, who now pressed his horse with every ounce of strength, the gamble of a race was a chance to make something more of oneself.

The crowd quietly chatted together as the riders disappeared from view. Each member had their own opinion of who was in the lead and the prospect of the return trip.

It wasn't long before the loud sound of hoofs again reverberated on the gravel road. All eyes watched and bodies leaned, to get the first glimpse of the rider first to come into view.

Lady Abigail held in her cheer on seeing that it was Lord Heshing in the lead. Mr. James was quickly gaining on the earl and Abigail was torn with nerves. She knew it would be more right for her to wish Mr. James to win the race, as he was sure to need the win more than an earl, but she couldn't help but wish the champion to be the intriguing new lord.

Finally, the last seconds of the race were upon them. Some in the crowd began to shout or cheer in the final moments. It was just barely by a nose of the horse that Lord Heshing won the race.

Lady Abigail couldn't help but cheer along with her sister-in-law who had won the bet, but with no experience, had no idea what that meant, exactly.

"Your Grace," Lord Fenton said, coming up to the duke, having not yet been introduced to his wife, "here are your winnings. Congratulations."

"I thank you, Fenton," the duke said, "but I did not place any bets."

Lord Fenton looked between the duke and the rest of the trio, a little unsure what to do.

"Was this your doing?" the duke turned on Lady Abigail.

"It was mine, actually," Isabella said with an upturned chin. "I've

always wanted to bet on a horse race. I must be very good at it as well, seeing how I won my first try.”

She promptly removed the money from Lord Fenton’s hands as they were introduced to each other by way of her husband.

The duke smiled softly at his wife and, with a shaking head, laughed.

“I believe my sister has been a bad influence on you,” he said.

“Not at all. If anything, my love, it is you that has been the influence. In fact, you seemed to know Lord Fenton very well for someone shaming his sister for attending such adventures.”

“It is one thing for a man to be present at races, a lady is entirely different.”

“And what of a duke and duchess?” she retorted with a smile on her lips.

“I suppose we will discover that tomorrow in the gossip column. Come, you two. Let us be off before we are noticed any more than we have been.”

“Oh, please may I go congratulate the rider first? You said you know him,” the duchess asked her husband in her sweet way.

Lady Abigail’s heart did a little leap at the thought of meeting this handsome man who seemed to be the champion of the hour.

The duke led the two ladies over to Lord Heshing. He was gratefully taking the congratulations from others as he stroked his beautiful steed.

“Your Grace,” he said, with a bow to the duke.

“Please let me have the pleasure of introducing my wife, the Duchess of Wintercrest, and younger sister, Lady Abigail Grant.”

Lord Heshing politely bowed and greeted both ladies.

“It was fortunate you happened to stop by today,” Lord Heshing said to the duke. “I would have hated to lose a race in front of Your Grace.”

“If I heard correctly the rumors swirling around the crowd of onlookers, losing doesn’t happen too often for you,” the duke retorted.

“Though I suspect that would not be the case if it were still your day of horse races.”

Both Lady Abigail and the duchess looked at the duke in utter shock.

“His Grace was quite a legend,” Lord Heshing said in answer to their expressions.

“And here you were giving me such a hard time,” Lady Abigail said. “And you used to actually race horses yourself?”

“It was a very long time ago, when I was just a young pup without a dukedom to consider.”

“Still, you teased me all morning long,” Lady Abigail said with hands on her hips.

“Unfortunately, Lord Heshing, I may never speak to you again as you have just ruined my image in front of my wife and given my sister sufficient cause to vex me for many days,” the duke said in a teasing fashion.

“Oh, absolutely not. I think I rather like Lord Heshing’s honesty about your youthful years. I think we must have him over for dinner soon to hear more of your galivanting tales,” the duchess retorted.

“I would be most honored by such an invitation, Your Grace,” Heshing said with a slight bow.

Lady Abigail couldn’t help but notice that though he spoke the words to Isabella, he did it with eyes on her. It sent little chills of excitement up and down her spine as his soft brown eyes seemed to see deep inside her inner self and find it of interest.

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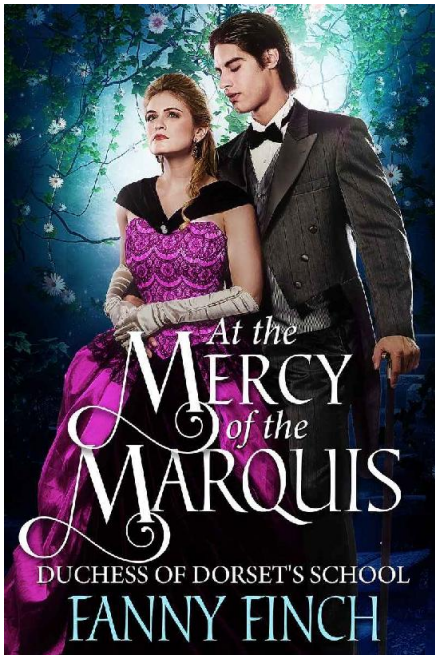
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